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RED STAR MAGAZINE 10-8

OCT. 8

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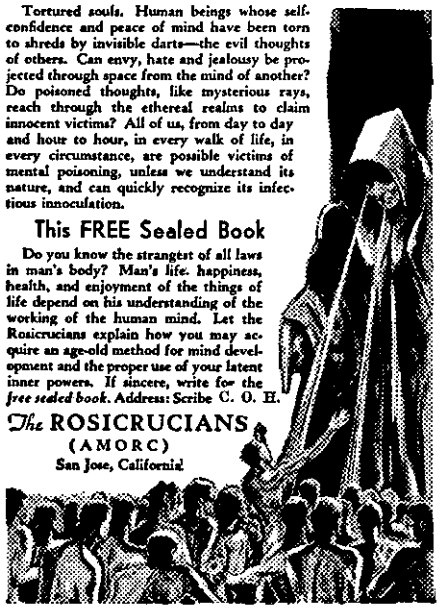

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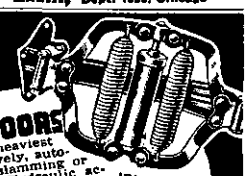

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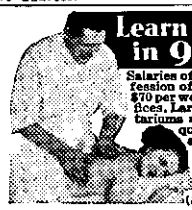

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ARGOSY

Action Stories of Every Variety

Combined with All-American Fiction

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NO- NOT ME. I'M NOT GOING TO WASTE MY TIME. SUCCESS IS JUST A MATTER OF LUCK AND I WASN'T BORN LUCKY.

BILL SAID "YES" HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY IN RADIO NOW
THIS N.R.I. TRAINING IS GREAT. AND THEY SENT REAL RADIO PARTS TO HELP ME LEARN QUICKLY
YOU CERTAINLY KNOW RADIO. MINE NEVER SOUNDED BETTER.
I'VE BEEN STUDYING RADIO ONLY A FEW MONTHS AND I'M ALREADY MAKING GOOD MONEY IN MY SPARE TIME
THANKS
OH BILL! I'M SO PROUD OF YOU. YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO
YES! I'VE GOT A GOOD JOB NOW AND A REAL FUTURE, THANKS TO N.R.I. TRAINING
TOM SAID "NO" HE'S STILL WAITING FOR "LUCK"
BILL'S A SAP TO WASTE HIS TIME STUDYING RADIO AT HOME
SAME OLD GRIND -- SAME SKINNY PAY ENVELOPE -- I'M JUST WHERE I WAS FIVE YEARS AGO
GUESS I'M A FAILURE. LOOKS LIKE I'LL NEVER GET ANYWHERE
YOU'LL ALWAYS BE A FAILURE, TOM, UNLESS YOU DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. WISHING AND WAITING WON'T GET YOU ANYWHERE

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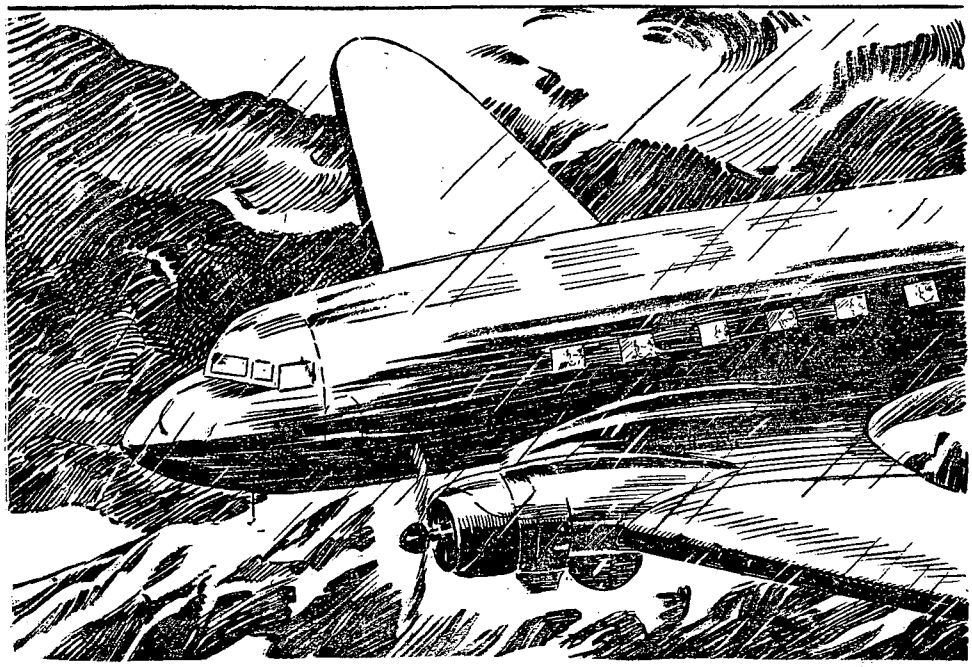

Two Hours to Go

By THEODORE ROSCOE

Author of "A Grave Must Be Deep," "The Heads of Sergeant Baptiste," etc.

"If you had but two hours to live, what would you do with them?" John Enfield asks the thirteen passengers in the grounded Trans-Andes plane. And on their answers depend their own Fate and that of the cruelest killer yet unhung. Beginning a distinguished new novel . . .

PASSENGER SEATING
Trans-Andean Air Express
Buenos Aires to Santiago, Chile, Sept. 15

PORT SIDE

Seat Number 1: John Enfield
Seat Number 3: Adam Henry Clay
Seat Number 5: Millicent Royce
Seat Number 7: Irving Flaum
Seat Number 9: Mrs. Albert Earwig
Seat Number 11: Mr. Albert Earwig
Seat Number 13: Jack McCracken

STARBOARD SIDE

Seat Number 2: Mary Messenger
Seat Number 4: Hammand Carlyle
Seat Number 6: Mrs. Piedmont Lennington
Seat Number 8: Rowena Lennington
Seat Number 10: Heinrich Gerstner
Seat Number 12: Mr. Clay's manservant
Seat Number 14: Dr. Mansell H. Hilary

CHAPTER I

AND ONE IS A MURDERER

EVERYBODY looked startled when the engines slowed, and as a tremor went through the ship and they realized the automatic landing gear was being lowered, the passengers darted quick glances toward the pilot's cockpit and stared at each other and put their faces to the rain-steaming windows, their expressions various with surprise, puzzlement, anxiety.

Evening had dissolved into a gray, sweeping downpour; the landscape was obscured by thick vapor and clouds of rain; as the plane rolled, splashing, across this

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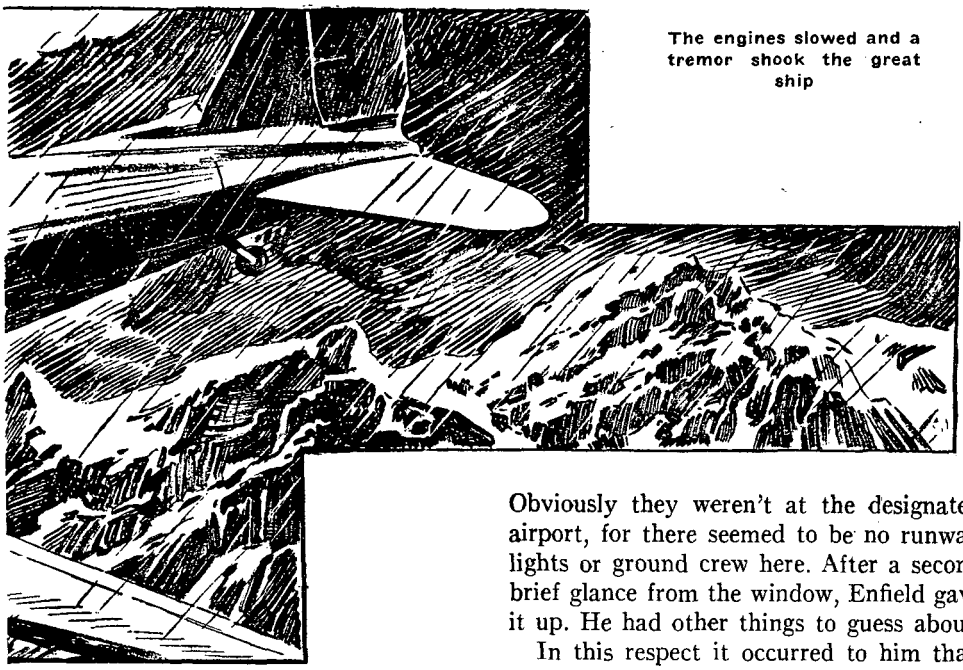

The engines slowed and a tremor shook the great ship

unexpected landing field, there were ejaculations of, "Something's happened!" and, "Looks like the end of the world!" and such questions as, "What's the matter?" and, "Why are we landing here?"

The steward didn't know; but Enfield, from earlier observation, had decided that the steward didn't know anything.

The pilot and co-pilot, hurrying from the cockpit and shouldering into their oilskins as they hurried, apparently knew; but, as is the fashion of ship's officers under emergency, they refused to tell, hustling to the vestibule door and slamming it behind them as they went out into the rain, leaving their passengers to guess.

The window told Enfield nothing; the rain was descending in a gusty deluge that became, when the wind veered, a flying brume; daylight was fast being extinguished; there was no visible scenery beyond thirty feet of marshy grass. They were probably in a valley, but for all the view, they might have been in a submarine.

An examination of the schedule showed them grounded two hours ahead of time. Obviously they weren't at the designated airport, for there seemed to be no runway lights or ground crew here. After a second brief glance from the window, Enfield gave it up. He had other things to guess about.

In this respect it occurred to him that, so far as his own business aboard this plane was concerned, a delay might be providential. Time was what he wanted—time to analyze, to study, to observe. The time from Buenos Aires had passed much faster than he had expected—it was harder to make the acquaintance of people aboard a plane than he had anticipated, for one's movements were more restricted than on shipboard or in a club car, the passengers more preoccupied with the novelty of flying—and he had been afraid that the evening hours remaining to Santiago de Chile would prove as fruitless to his purpose as the day's journey had been.

And one of these passengers might be a murderer, Enfield knew. The letter in his pocket said: *"Taking Trans-Andean Air Express Sept. 15th Buenos Aires to Santiago, Chile."* It was signed by a piece of silk, a fragment of cherry-colored foulard flowered with forget-me-nots. There was a dark stain in one corner of the fragment which matched in color and design eleven similar fragments that had come to Enfield through the mail. Piece by piece these fragments were forming a pattern—a pattern that, when completed,

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should resemble, symbolically enough, a hangman's noose.

Would he be able to place it around the neck of one of his fellow travelers? There were thirteen, not counting himself. One of them was a murderer—?

AT LUNCH time he had hoped for an opportunity to engage them in conversation, but the group had scattered to go sightseeing, the *cantina* had been too hot and uncomfortable for table talk. One had to bide his time to draw out people, particularly when, as was the case with this passenger list, their number seemed uncongenial. The traveling men in the party were bored, and the tourists, who were seeing South America via the same cruise boat and had signed up for this land-junket over the Andes, did not appear as companionable as the average run.

Enfield had been trying to devise some means of developing a general discussion, but remarks let fall concerning Mr. Roosevelt, the weather, the relative merits of vacations in the mountains and vacations at the shore, the war in China and (offhandedly) the recent kidnappings in the States were received with desultory interest. He was in all probability wasting his time, he knew, but in his business everything was grist for his mill, no chance must be discounted, and to further the task, he must work by indirection.

It was just by luck—turning the pages of a magazine a short while ago—he had hit upon what might be an opening lever. He hoped the pilot, whatever his reason for this unscheduled landing, would take his time. Enfield had found that the best way to explore a personality was to start a person talking about himself—a subject that invariably appealed to the speaker's interest, and on which, once started, the speaker might discourse at considerable length.

So he waited until the first flurry of excitement, craning and worrying died down, and then, in as informal a manner as he could assume, he tried his leading question.

"What I've been thinking of is this," he proposed to the man in the neighboring lounge chair. "Suppose you had only two hours left to go. And you knew you had only two hours. Some divination came to you, say, and you knew that in two hours from now your number would be up. What would you do with those last two hours?"

"What would I do with them?" Above the steady drumming of the rain the portly man's voice, gruff from the habit of importance and loudened by a note of irritation, carried the length of the airliner's cabin. "How do you mean, what would I do with them?"

Enfield's smile invited conversation. "Assuming you could press a magic button, for instance, and be transported anywhere you wished to go. Taken back by any episode in your life you might wish to repeat; carried into any future you might anticipate; granted the ability to experience anything you'd like to experience. In other words, you've got two hours left to live, and you're granted an opportunity to spend that time in any way you desire. Would you spend it reading the Bible or drinking champagne? At home with your family, or visiting some spot you've hankered to see all your life, like the Taj Mahal? Re-living some memorable moment; making restitution for some mistake in the past; or realizing some triumph, some unfulfilled ambition? Your last two hours—how would you spend them?"

"Well, I wouldn't spend them here!" There was annoyance in the older man's gesture—indicating the airliner's interior by a brusque flourish with his cigar. He moved his shoulders impatiently. "I wouldn't spend them sitting here all night in a broken down plane somewhere in the middle of nowhere. Waiting for some half-baked pilot that's gone off heaven knows where to come back when he feels like it and get us out of this flood."

His tone implied a growing indignation against all this—South America; the Trans-Andean Airlines (doubtless sabotaged by a bunch of Reds); rainstorms; mountains at night; and (he would write

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a letter to the President of Chile) the incompetent Air Ministry that allowed incompetent transport pilots to fly ill-conditioned passenger planes that lacked proper equipment and modern conveniences. His acid glance included the co-pilot, a dim figure in oilskins posted with his smoky lantern on the rainswept cabin-step; the passengers ranged down the aisle, at ease, dozing, or restless in their lounge chairs, according to individual temperaments; the traveler at his left, heretofore companionable enough in the forced democracy of a plane-ride, but now, with his absurd questions, annoying.

ENFIELD, reading the acrimony in the portly man's response, blandly ignored it. He said affably, "Well, I certainly wouldn't want to spend my last two hours in a plane grounded by rain somewhere in the Andes, myself, given the opportunity to spend them as I chose. But how would I spend them? Where?"

He paused to grope for a package of cigarettes. Lighting one, he sank back comfortably, and went on as if the portly man were interested, "I got to thinking about it at that place we landed this afternoon at lunch. What was it called—San Luis del Monte? Just a flying field, some stone huts, shepherds, a couple of llamas standing around. Plane once a week, and only stops long enough to pick up gas. Like this place we're grounded now. End-of-the-world. Then," he tapped the magazine folded across his knee, "I came across an article in here about José Ramon Figurada. Remember him? The famous Chilean sculptor? Wealth, culture, lived in gay retirement in Paris. Well, he developed a heart condition, the doctors gave him only a few days to live, and what did the old sculptor do? Wanted to end his last hours in the place he was born. That San Luis del Monte outpost. So he flew back there just in time to live two hours and die, according to the article, happy."

The portly man snorted, "My God!"

Enfield turned companionably in his chair. "I began speculating on how I would spend my last two hours on earth, given the option. And I ran into quite a problem. Took me the rest of the afternoon to decide; and then, if you'll pardon the personality, I began wondering about the others here in the plane, about you. Adam Henry Clay"—in Enfield's respectful pronouncement of the portly man's name there was a nuance of flattery— "of the vast Clay Newspaper Syndicate—millionaire publisher, world traveler, philanthropist—" Enfield could have added "political pirate" but paused on the right note of admiration. "I began wondering how a man who's seen and done everything, so to speak, had fame, money, success—another man like this great sculptor —would choose to spend his last two hours."

Not completely immune to a tone of deference, Adam Henry Clay swelled a little. But a gust of wind-blown rain against the windowpane behind his neck dispelled the faint warmth of pleasure. His features soured. The plane was muggy, airless. Flying at ten thousand it had been too cold for comfort. In this valley, black, mountain-hemmed, the cabin with its doors and ports closed and the heat still on, was too warm. His collar was sticky. Enfield could imagine the publisher thinking, "Millicent got me into this, and if she thinks I don't know why she wanted to make this stupid trip instead of arranging for a private plane, I'll soon let her know." His eyes were on Enfield resentfully. He said curtly, "I'm afraid I couldn't answer your question offhand, young man."

"I could."

IT WAS the girl on the other side of the publisher's chair—the girl with the sulky eyes. Not exactly a girl, either, Enfield had decided; woman was closer to it, somewhere between "lady" and "a dame," although you never could tell the age of that kind, whether they were old and had been remodeled, or were young and had seen a lot of wear. Hollywood, probably; flunked out with the silents—one could imagine her hurling boxes of

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candy at her maids and cursing the hairdresser. Enfield leaned forward interested, amused by the shade of malice in her declaration.

Adam Henry Clay was regarding the woman with his eyebrows angled in displeasure. "Could you, indeed?" he challenged her statement. There was an edge to his voice that drew the attention of the pretty girl across the aisle; the quiet man seated beside her looked up briefly from his book; in the chairs beyond, the mother and daughter who had been engaged in low-voiced conversation, turned quick unveiled glances of disapproval.

The newspaper tycoon rumbled inhumorously, "So you know how I would wish to spend my last two hours, do you, Millicent?"

"Yes." The woman considered him with a thinnish smile.

"And where do you think that would be, my dear, given such a choice as Mr. Enfield so imaginatively suggested?"

"In that palace—where was it in France last year—Versailles?"

"Hmm." Adam Henry Clay appeared relieved. Almost pleased. Enfield smiled inwardly, aware of the publisher's earlier embarrassment. Mr. Clay's lady friend could be quarrelsome. Her airplane luggage included a portable cocktail bar; the silver and glass shaker at her elbow was emptying again, and *daiquiris* did not seem to improve her disposition. During the stop at San Luis del Monte there had nearly been a scene. A man of Clay's standing would not be too happy about a row in public. Enfield had wondered why the millionaire publisher wasn't traveling by private plane. Doubtless hoped for anonymity on a crowded passenger transport, and these unlooked-for delays, entailing a certain intimacy with fellow travelers, must be exasperating. A stalled passenger liner was no place to air a private argument that was threatening.

"Why, yes," Adam Henry Clay was nodding, lips pursed relievedly, eyes considering the ash of his cigar. "Yes, Versailles was very pleasant. I always like it there. Might be a very pleasant place to spend one's last two hours. Walking with—er—someone. In the gardens."

"With someone," the woman agreed gratingly, "but not walking!"

"Eh?" Adam Henry Clay looked up. The little shaded reading lamp behind his chair touched a reddish highlight on his bulgy temples. "Not walking? And with someone—?"

"With Josephine."

"Josephine?" the publisher was starting a scowl.

"That was her name, wasn't it?" the woman appealed to Enfield. She chuckled harshly. "Yes, that's it. Josephine. And you," her eyes fixed Adam Henry Clay and hardened tauntingly, "you'd be standing there. In the palace at Versailles. With your legs apart. Chest out. Chin down, and frowning like he was in that picture with Charles Boyer. You'd have your hand thrust under your coat lapel, and you'd be snapping orders like a radio announcer. That's what you'd do if you could be anything you wanted for your last two hours. Running everybody and everything. Bossing the world. That's who you'd be. Napoleon!"

Her lips curled the name, and she settled back in her chair with an expression that concluded the speech with an almost audible "bah!"

SOMEONE in the after part of the cabin palmed a snicker. Adam Henry Clay's neck reddened. He started to say something, jabbed his cigar between his teeth and clamped down angrily. The mother and daughter down the aisle were turning their heads in undisguised disdain, a disdain previously directed at the woman's portable cocktail bar, expensive luggage and ostentatious blue fox furs. Others were listening without looking.

The portly newspaper owner said in a low voice from the side of his mouth, "If you must be clever, Millicent, please try to avoid a display of your lack of education. Napoleon didn't give his orders from Versailles."

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The woman laughed lightly, spitefully. "Well, wherever it was," she insisted. "That's just who he'd be in his last two hours," she leaned forward to nod at Enfield. "He'd love to be Napoleon."

Enfield said genially, "That isn't exactly what I meant, I'm afraid. You can't be somebody else in your last two hours—the point is, what would you do with yourself during your last two hours. That's the hypothesis."

"The what?"

"The supposition," Enfield explained. "Assume you have two hours left for life. You can press a magic button and be anywhere you want to be, doing anything you want to do—within your logical sphere of Time and you might say, within character, I mean. You couldn't go back to the days of Rome and be Cleopatra or spend your last two hours visiting Mars. But you could go back to some happy day in your childhood and eat apple pie, or you might go to Atlantic City or spend your last two hours finishing a painting or dancing with Clark Gable—something like that."

"I see. Your last fling. You're asking what I'd do with it."

"Only wondering," Enfield admitted, "what different people might do in that time if they had the chance. Take those of us right here in the plane. I imagine we'd each have a different answer, and some of them would seem pretty strange. That is," he smiled, "if we told the truth."

He was aware that conversation in the after part of the cabin had fallen silent while he spoke. The fuzzy-haired man with the owlish glasses, who had been pantomiming a joke to the elderly couple in the seats further aft, had paused to listen. The German in the seat across from them, previously absorbed in scowling at the darkness spattering his window, turned around. In the last two lounge chairs, flanking the door to the steward's cubby and baggage compartment, the wiry man who had been playing solitaire throughout the journey raised a blank-eyed gaze from the cards on the tray affixed to his chair-arm; and the white-haired old man stirred from a doze, and glanced up the sloping aisle at Enfield with gentle interest.

In the chair opposite Enfield's, the pretty girl had been frankly listening.

"May I," she leaned forward in her chair to ask, "play?"

ENFIELD had liked her, chatting with her at lunch time, wondered about her. A Miss Mary Messenger from Columbus, Ohio—unlike the more obvious tourist and traveling salesman types aboard the plane—seemed strangely misplaced in a South American airliner grounded in the Andes. Pretty described her—average brown hair, wholesome blue eyes, cheeks that could pink with excitement as they had when the plane had made the forced landing. Pretty, meaning pleasant and unsophisticated and with a vague wistfulness about her that had made Enfield feel sympathetic.

He smiled across at her, "Play?"

"Oh," her eagerness going crestfallen. "I am sorry. I—I just didn't hear what you said at first. I thought you were proposing to Miss Royce that we play a game. You know—where you ask everybody a question when it comes their turn, and if they refuse to answer they pay some kind of a forfeit, and if they do answer they have to tell the truth—"

"Well, why not?" Enfield mashed out his cigarette. "It's been darned dull sitting here since eight o'clock, and for all we know we may be stuck here until well after midnight. No scenery and nothing to do but sit. A game might help kill time."

At this the portly publisher beside Enfield grunted up from his chair, snapped a disparaging, "Pardon me!" and stamped down the aisle to the steward's cubby where he slammed the door behind him and was at once heard berating the occupants on a matter of hot coffee.

The woman in the blue fox furs muttered something that sounded to Enfield like, "Beetlepuss," yawned a casual, "Don't mind him," and turned her attention to her cocktail tray.

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There was a general shifting of glances, a hitching in chairs at this interruption; Enfield was about to enlarge on his suggestion to the girl across the aisle, when there came a second interruption. The voice of the co-pilot on the gangway-steps outside. Crackle of boots on gravel. Light wavering across a rain-glazed window; an exchange of words blurred by the blowing downpour; then the half-seen figure of the pilot, flashlight in hand, mounting the gangway-steps to enter the cabin.

CHAPTER II

TRUTH—AND CONSEQUENCES

THE pilot came in hastily, shutting the metal door against a gust of black spray and an invasion of wind and blustering night. Pocketing the flashlight in his oilskin reefer, he shook water from his pilot's cap, drew a handkerchief to wipe cold beads of rain from his face, then, wet and visibly chilled, stood in the entry at Miss Messenger's elbow, with troubled eyes gravely asking the attention of the passengers.

"Ladies and gentlemen." A Chilean, his slightly accented English was stiff with Spanish formality. "I am sorry to disappoint you, but it looks as if we might be delayed here for quite a while."

"Heavens! is something wrong with the plane?" It was Mrs. Piedmont Lennington of the mother-traveling-with-daughter pair, heretofore aloof—save for the glances directed at the woman in blue fox—from the confined association of an airliner's passenger-cabin.

The pilot's black eyes were reserved. He said, in the manner of one making a dry report, "There is no cause for alarm, *señora*. This is a deserted landing-field—one that was used by the Chilean Air Force at the time of the Tacna-Arica dispute with Peru. Since our dispute was settled some of these mountain posts are no longer employed. There is a shed at the end of the field, but I am unhappy to say no ground crew, no telephone or wireless remains. The field has long been out of operation."

"Then why the devil did you land here?" Adam Henry Clay's voice boomed from the door of the steward's cubby. The publisher's face, glowering from the narrow doorway, expressed outrage. Framed behind him were the discreet figures of the publisher's valet, Charles—a pale, expressionless individual who made Enfield think of those cat-footed butlers in English novels who came and went with the ignored impersonality of shadows—and Sordo, the harassed airline-steward.

The publisher demanded angrily, "Why the devil did you come down here in such a God-forsaken spot?"

"Fortunate I discovered a place in the dusk where I might land at all," the pilot countered stiffly. "These are the Andes Mountains, *señor*—a wilderness. And I could not with safety have proceeded further. In a night of such weather as this there is the great danger of becoming lost."

"Lost?"

"The dynamotor has burned out on the radio, *señor,* making it impossible to receive or transmit. It was absolutely imperative that we land. Under other weather conditions I might have attempted flying blind, but I will not risk the lives of passengers. The temperature is falling, and this rain may soon be snow. Heavily loaded as we are, I do not risk a flight in a possible blizzard. The de-icers on this plane are faulty."

"And we've got to sit here? Adam Henry Clay demanded furiously. "How about my steamer connections? Miss Royce's steamer connections? We've got to catch a ship. The—"

"My daughter and I are expecting to sail on the same boat," Mrs. Piedmont Lennington declared.

"And Mrs. Earwig and I—" from the shy little man across the aisle.

"I AM very sorry, ladies and gentlemen." The pilot shook his head. "I am sure the line will make good for the inconveniences of this delay. I could fly you blind, despite the failure of the radio, but I am sure you would not desire

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me to go on at such hazard. There is a military airbase several hundred miles from here, the scheduled landing field before we reach our destination. That is a flight of two hours, and we have only enough petrol to make that field, with little to spare. Should I miss it—a possibility in this weather—we would be lost. I cannot risk your lives in the attempt."

His gesture of finality settled the issue.

He concluded decisively, "My map shows a mining camp some fifteen miles west of here. There will be a telephone. It is possible I can summon a relief plane from Valparaiso. However it may take me a number of hours to walk the distance to the camp, as there is no direct mountain road. Meantime I will leave my co-pilot in charge. He is a German, but understands Spanish, and you may communicate with him through the steward, should a need arise. I am sorry we have no sleeper accommodations, but the steward has a supply of coffee and food, and will do his best to make you as comfortable as possible. I do not need to add that Walther, the co-pilot I am leaving in charge, is a most competent man. Please remain inside the plane, and be assured you are in no immediate peril."

He was bowing, about to back out.

"Just a moment," Enfield requested. He stood up with his hands at ease in trouser pockets and asked mildly, "I think, as your passengers, we ought to know. Just what do you mean by no immediate peril."

The pilot lifted his shoulders. "There is always a certain amount of peril in a wilderness, *señor*. These, I repeat, are the Andes. A snowstorm may obliterate a camp. Trails become impassable. Temperatures go far below zero. One walking afoot may easily become lost. Floods—landslides—" he made a Spanish shrug. "Such disasters are rare, but stranded in a plane, out of communication with the world, in remote mountains such as these—there is always a possibility—"

Wind caterwauled, drowning his cautionary, "Please remain in the plane," as he backed through the door. A rush of cold air, an inburst of rain that filled the lighted cabin with a breath of icy mist, and he was gone.

A sense of desolation was immediate. A feeling of isolation; of wild mountains closing in; of helpless confinement in an insecure haven assailed by all the forces of nature; of darkness, wind and water. At once the night beyond the windows seemed blacker; the cabin smaller; the wind that wailed in the plane's understructure more violent; the rain, a storm.

A dismay that verged on panic brought some of the passengers to their feet. Others peered anxiously out at the night. Voices rose in consternation, questioning, exclaiming, worried by the inference in the pilot's warning, or complaining against the airliner's plight.

"I'll sue!" Adam Henry Clay announced savagely. "Sue the line!"

"Stranded," from the fuzzy-haired man with the owlish glasses. "And me with an important meeting with the Rosario Brothers tomorrow."

"Peril?" Mrs. Earwig was timidly asking her husband. "What was that he said about some kind of peril?"

"Herr Gott!" the German in the seat opposite the Earwigs was glaring up the aisle at the door to the pilot's cockpit. "What kind of a line is this, that there is a failure of the radio."

Mrs. Piedmont Lennington was standing up, tight-lipped, clutching her handbag. "Rowena, this is impossible." Her daughter, a hand on her mother's arm, was admonishing, "Now, now, Mother, don't worry—"

AT Miss Messenger's elbow the quiet man had closer his book to peer, eyes shaded by cupped palms, into blackness outside his window. Little Mr. Earwig was looking about him, confused; the wiry man at the aisle's end, having listened unemotionally to the pilot's announcement, had resumed dealing himself a hand of cards; and the white-haired old gentleman with the kindly eyes was composing himself with a cigarette.

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Enfield noted these details with the same quickness of observation by which he had seen Miss Royce's adventurous smile greet the Spanish pilot, Miss Messenger's repressed excitement. Nobody was really frightened after the first moment of dismay; tension relaxed as the passengers reseated themselves; the steward moved up the aisle, serving coffee; general complaint had to do with the discomfort of sitting up all night, the inconvenience of delay, lack of accommodation.

Mrs. Piedmont Lennington cried, "Can't some of you men do something? That pilot's deserted us. He said if it snowed we might starve here—freeze—"

The quiet man at Miss Messenger's side murmured, "We ought to be grateful the fellow could make a landing under such conditions."

Enfield spoke up reassuringly, "Not a chance of that, Mrs. Lennington. It takes weeks of blizzard to blanket a plane. We can't starve, and there are generators to keep the heat on. That pilot should be back by morning; he only described the possibility of danger to make us remain aboard the plane, that's all. There's nothing we can do but wait."

"But who wants to sit here all night?" the woman in the blue fox protested bitterly. "Shut in here like this. With nothing to do. My God!"

"Why, let's play that game, then," Miss Messenger appealed to Enfield. "That will keep our minds off the inconvenience and take up some of the time." She addressed the others cheerfully. "Look. We're all going to play a game. It's called Truth and Consequences."

Enfield thought at the time what an apt title that might turn out to be, how strangely it might apply. Truth—and Consequences.

But the pretty girl's suggestion that they occupy the time with a game, along with the familiar aroma of the steward's coffee, did much to dispel the lingering uneasiness, the sense of being cut off from the world, isolated in a boisterous wilderness of night and ungovernable weather.

"Only I don't exactly know about any game," Enfield explained to those who had turned in their lounge chairs to listen. Seated at the head of the aisle that sloped aft to the door of the steward's cubby, so that those at the cabin's end, when the plane was grounded, were at a level below those in the forepart of the cabin—seated at the head of the aisle, Enfield felt a little like a tour conductor. One of those bright lads on cruise ships—a breed he secretly hated—who organized bridge parties, costume dances and deck games, harrying the tired tourist into a resolve never to travel again.

He could appreciate the snort from Adam Henry Clay, the blank stare of the man playing solitaire, Mrs. Piedmont Lennington's sniff.

"I don't exactly know what Miss Messenger has in mind," he ignored an atmosphere of diffidence. "But I proposed to myself a question this afternoon that kept me mentally occupied for quite a while."

He repeated the proposition he had put to the portly newspaper owner. He *had* to make these people talk—somehow.

COFFEE-CUP balanced in lap, her lounge chair swiveled to face Enfield's, Miss Messenger was concentrating on his words. Now she put aside cup and saucer and said with unexpected intensity, "Well, I know what I'd do. I know what I'd do if I suddenly realized it was my last two hours."

"As readily as that?" Chin in palm, elbow braced on chair arm, the quiet man in the chair next to her's had been listening attentively. His gray eyes, shifting from Enfield to the girl's faintly flushed face, were quizzical. "You know what you'd do as readily as that, Miss Messenger?"

"Yes, I do," her voice was decisive.

"But you can't, honestly," the man beside her smiled disbelief. Enfield liked the quiet man's smile; it brightened up a face otherwise too sober, too reserved. The man was several years younger than himself, Enfield judged, despite the streak of

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gray at the temples, the troubled lines at the corners of the eyes. Thirty-eight, maybe, with a restraint about him that implied care, a fitness about him of one who held something in reserve for any future contest.

"You can't honestly decide what you'd do with your last two hours as quickly as that," the man repeated. "That's the trouble with Mr. Enfield's interesting question. I imagine to answer it honestly it would take considerable thought. Why, most of us don't know what to do with ourselves given a lifetime. We sort of muddle along from day to day without any plan. Just drift."

"But that's because we aren't given a magic choice," the girl pointed out. "We're tied down by our daily tasks—by routines—by heredity and environment."

"And given liberty we don't know what to do with it," the quiet man countered gravely. "Few people would want such liberty—the chance to control their own destiny—decide their own course of action—even for two hours."

"I know what I'd do," Miss Messenger insisted. "I imagine it would surprise you. All of you."

The quiet man sat back with folded arms, encouraging her to speak by an interested nod. "And you honestly know?" he questioned.

"And I'll answer honestly," the girl told him. "Why not?" her eyes were a little defiant. "After all, when the trip is over and we're all back on the cruise steamer I'll probably never see any of you again. I mean, I'm not afraid to answer Mr. Enfield's question truthfully, and the game won't be any fun unless the answers are given truthfully. Only," she reminded the man at her side, "if I answer truthfully, then when it comes your turn to answer the same question you must answer truthfully, too. Otherwise you must pay a forfeit, anything I ask."

"I'm game," the quiet man smiled. "And I'll try to answer the question. All right, Miss Messenger, go ahead."

There was a pause filled by an intrusion of pluvial sounds, the undertone drumroll of the rain, the mourning of mountain wind, the scurry and plash of water whipped against metalwork and window glass. Outside, somewhere forward near the airliner's night-blotted wings, the co-pilot was working—a faint *tack, tack, tack* from his hammer.

The tapping sounded lonely and far away; and drawn together in common alliance against the alien environment, the discomfort and lateness of the hour, the passengers—despite whatever uneasiness, agitation or indifference might have distracted them—turned their eyes to the girl who was speaking.

"Well," she faced them with a shade of obstinacy in her manner, as though she expected her words to incur their disapproval, "I'll tell you what I'd do with *my* last two hours, if I had that magic choice. I'd stay right here."

ENFIELD looked at the girl. She seemed to be very much in earnest—one of those persons who took a game seriously—and she gave the impression she was speaking as honestly as she could. It was her manner, as much as her answer, that struck him as unexpected. From previous observation, he would have anticipated a different answer, something more lightly imaginative, tinged with sentiment. And by some odd cue in her behavior, Enfield sensed her words were directed at the man seated beside her, some challenge in her eyes inviting his inquiry, provoking his contention.

Had there been some controversy between the two, Enfield wondered. He didn't know. They had come down on the cruise ship together; in company with the other tourists in the plane, were making this flight across South America. Making their acquaintance on the plane during this return trip to Chile, Enfield might have suspected a shipboard romance, but the quiet man's atitude was too impersonal, detached.

He was saying with polite interest, "Well, that is surprising, Miss Messenger.

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Given a chance to be anywhere you wished, doing anything you wished, you'd spend your last two hours right here."

Mrs. Piedmont Lennington sniffed. Rowena Lennington, a tall, willowy girl in a mannish traveling suit, murmured, "Really now?" in a tone of disbelief, and regarded Mary Messenger with appraising eyes. The German traveling salesman grunted, *"Herr Gott!"* and turned his attention to the window, while Adam Henry Clay grabbed a newspaper from the magazine rack over the writing desk, stamped up the aisle to his chair, and withdrew behind the paper with a snort, as if the cabin and its company were beneath any further notice.

Mary Messenger said resolutely, "Well, that's my answer, and that's what I'd do. Spend my last two hours right here. Most of you probably think that sounds crazy. You don't like to be sitting here like this in a plane stranded in the middle of the Andes. You don't like the delay, the uncertainty. You want to get back to the cruise ship, back to your business," she nodded at the fuzzy-haired man, "or you want to get back home. This is strange and—off-the-map to you, and you don't like it. But I came on this cruise to South America because I wanted to see and feel something strange; I wanted to get off the map."

She leaned forward in her chair, clasping her hands in her lap, her voice strained as if in an effort to make them understand.

"All the time I've been on this trip to South America, it's been impressed on me that people, most people, who take a cruise don't really like to travel. They don't really want to get away, see and feel something different, experience a change. And before the cruise was half over, they were wanting, secretly wanting, to be home. In their minds they could see themselves telling envious friends about the places they'd seen, showing the snapshots and curios. Foreign countries didn't mean anything different to them—I can't explain exactly—I mean they saw those places through the same glasses they always wore at home. They didn't really like the Spaniards and Brazilians and Negroes and foreign buildings—unless the buildings were big and modern like those in America—they didn't really approve of anyone or anything different from their own pattern. Bill Jones in Buenos Aires was the same Bill Jones as he was in Chicago or Ashtabula or Kansas City.

"I DON'T say that isn't all right," the girl gestured earnestly. "But I came on this trip because I wanted a change, because I didn't want to be the same. I didn't just want to see things I'd never seen before; I wanted to *feel* things I'd never felt before—experience things. All my life I've saved to take this cruise, and when I took it I wanted something to happen—I didn't care what—as long as it was different. It seems terrible to me to go through life without anything happening, without experiencing any real emotion or violence (I don't mean excitement, exactly) or coming up against anything out of the way. Oh, I don't mean a dramatic adventure in the ordinary sense—I mean just something vital, something to make you feel you're living."

She drew a breath, shaking her head. "It's hard to explain what I mean, and I guess I'm getting all jumbled up, but all the while on the trip I was thinking, 'Nothing's really happened to change your viewpoint at all, you're only changing your location—' I wanted to think and feel differently, but I felt the same as I always had; there wasn't time to see all those places we visited, to experience them, to get into the spirit of them. They were just like views on postcards, and before there was time to have them make a real impression, the next card was handed you to look at.

"Then it seemed to me the trouble was that everything came down to schedule. The trip was all mapped out; routine. The ship left on time and would arrive back in America on time. There was the itinerary in the tourist catalog: Havana

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on Wednesday; Trinidad on Friday morning—drive to mountains and see asphalt lake; Panama on Sunday; Ecuador Tuesday noon; Peru for two days; Chile—fly to Argentina and return over week-end. Twenty minutes to see famous cathedral. Twelve and one-half minutes to look at monument for Simon Bolivar. Passengers must be back on ship by five P.M. or ten A.M., or midnight sharp."

Mary Messenger pointed to a time-table in a wall-rack near her chair. "All my life I've been living to a schedule," she deplored. "My father was a watch-maker, and our home was run by clockwork, too—up at such a time, retire at such a time, nobody must ever be late to meals. I'm an algebra teacher in a big junior high school where bells ring and everything runs by program. As if being an algebra teacher isn't bad enough, I commute. It seems to me as if all my life I've had to be somewhere on time, leave somewhere on time, do this or that by rule or program or mathematical formula. And on this trip to South America, I'd merely substituted one schedule for another.

"It may seem funny for a teacher of mathematics, but do you know I used to wish that once—just once—the horrible precision of all those little figures would work out differently, that I'd walk in some morning and two times two wouldn't equal four? It seemed to me if that would happen—well—anything could happen. And that was why I couldn't feel differently on this cruise to South America; two times two, in a way, was still equalling four, everything was still by schedule.

"But there we are in the Andes Mountains. The Andes—do you see? In a place not on schedule. This strange valley where winds blow unexpectedly and water roars down gorges that aren't safe and little men with colored blankets on their shoulders herd llamas and work in silver mines when they feel like it. This is what I came on the trip for—this failure of the radio and landing at night—something that wasn't all worked out like an equation, that wasn't all safe and sound with a policeman on the corner to get me across the street so I could just be Mary Messenger back in the old mathematical routine."

She looked up, suddenly self-conscious. Tucked a strand of hair behind an ear, and conncluded, flushing a little, "Anyway, that's the reason for my answer. This is the first time I've felt I wasn't Mary Messenger back in the old routine. Others of you, who may not live in routines, won't appreciate it. For me, this is something different, out of the ordinary experience. Something that wasn't down to schedule, in the program, planned. This is what I came to South America for. I—I feel as if, for a while, two times two isn't equalling four. That's why I'd like to spend my last two hours here. Just like this. Experiencing something different. Not getting somewhere on time. Doing something that wasn't calculated. Not on schedule."

THERE was a moment after the girl stopped speaking when the atmosphere in the plane seemed hushed. A circle of blue cigar smoke hung suspended in motionless lamplight, mingling its pungence with a faint drift of perfume and the scent of coffee. The passengers remained posed in their various attitudes of attention or indifference; but Enfield saw that the girl's candid self-indulgence had engrossed most of them; concentrating on her avowal of personal distress, they had momentarily forgotten their immediate adversity.

Enfield was pleased to see that his thought had taken hold. He gave the game a nudge by saying, "Fair enough, Miss Messenger. That lets you out of a forfeit."

She leaned back in her chair relievedly, a trifle breathless. Having unburdened herself before comparative strangers, she was a little shy. She said apologetically, "I didn't mean to tell the story of my life. Now it's Mr. Carlyle's turn to answer the same question."

"But before I answer it," the quiet man in the chair beside her appealed, "might I ask you something about your answer, Miss Messenger? Where would the world be if things didn't run to schedule?"

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"Where is the world anyway?" she countered. "All these people running to catch street cars and keep appointments—are they really getting anywhere? Is there more happiness in Italy where they say the trains are now running on time—or are they just running on time to be on time for the next war?" She shook her head. "Anyway, I wasn't prescribing for the world."

"Maybe it's not the matter of a schedule, but what you're doing according to schedule," the man suggested gravely. "You'd want to be home on time, say, if you had a family, children—"

"Children?" hotly. "No, thank you. After eleven years teaching school?"

She pressed her lips together on an inflection of exasperation that declined further inquiry. Her eyes, hot, fixed on the hands clasped in her lap.

Enfield thought: Frustration. Inhibited. Too close to routine monotony, régulation, drill. A touch of claustrophobia, this accent on the Andes, the open wilderness? Average person preferred supervision over his time—unless unbalanced by an overdose. But she was probably just an inhibited girl, wearied by examination papers, sick of catching the 4:40, and embittered by the prospect of thirty-one and spinsterhood.

He credited her a thought of sympathy. What was the famous line from Thoreau? *"Most men lead lives of quiet desperation—"*

And now the quiet man at Miss Messenger's side was speaking, shifting his posture in the chair so that he might address his fellow travelers down the aisle.

"You've heard a teacher who dislikes school routine," he was begining with a pleasantly direct manner, "perhaps you'll be equally surprised by a lawyer who dislikes Law. The question is, what would I do with my last two hours, given the opportunity to do as I chose. Miss Messenger has said the rules of the game call for honesty, and as far as I can, I'll try to answer honestly, although the question might admit, given more thought, some other decision. At any rate, as far as I've been able to make up my mind, I know what I'd do. I'd press my magic button and go back to my office in Albany, New York. And there I'd break the Law!"

CHAPTER III

"YES, I'D BREAK THE LAW!"

THE quiet man paused to put aside his book and reach for pipe and tobacco pouch, a commonplace gesture which served to emphasize his cryptic declaration.

Adam Henry Clay lowered his newspaper, tilted the cigar in his face until the ash threatened his nose, awarded the man across the aisle an acrid glare before screening himself with the paper again. Diverted from pouring a cocktail, the woman in blue fox gave the speaker a scowl of interest. The fuzzy-haired man adjusted his horn-rimmed spectacles to stare. The Piedmont Lenningtons murmured in unison; little Mr. Earwig leaned past his wife to stare up the aisle with an expression that said, "Goodness gracious!" The solitaire-player, who had been shuffling his deck, looked up, poker-faced, and let the cards go *zzzzzp!* under his thumb; only the German watching the window, and the elderly gentleman who had relaxed in his chair with folded arms and eyes closed, remained unresponsive.

Enfield masked his own reaction by casually lighting a cigarette. Miss Messenger, whose voice was casual, betrayed startlement in her glance.

"You say you'd spend your last two hours breaking the Law?"

The quiet man leaned forward in his chair, turning the pipe in his fingers, thoughtfully. "I don't mean that quite as it sounds—that I'd go on a spree, committing felonies and misdemeanors. Perhaps I'd better begin by introducing myself to those here who aren't cruise tourists and only boarded the plane," his glance included Enfield, the fuzzy-haired man and the solitaire-player, "this morning.

"It won't mean anything to you, but I

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should have introduced myself before—I'm Carlyle, Hammand Carlyle."

Enfield and the fuzzy-haired man acknowledged the name by nods, and Carlyle went on: "When I said I'd spend my last two hours breaking the Law, I used the term more or less figuratively. I happen to be writing a book titled, *No Justice*. You see, I'm an apostate in my profession—resigned from the bar last year. The book tells why; I've tried to keep out all the red tape and Latin verbiage, make it simple and interesting for the layman to read—an attempt to reduce the whole legal procedure to its least common denominator—if it ever goes to press it ought to sell, with luck, about fifteen copies. But I'm trying, in the book, to explode the whole showy business; in particular I'd like to castigate capital punishment.

"Left to myself, I probably wouldn't finish the thing in two years; but with the magic button to drive me—under the compulsion of knowing I had but two hours left—I could probably complete the work, make it even compelling. That's how I'd like to spend my final two hours—writing something that would break up all the injustices in our present legal machinery, something that would help put an end to hangman's ropes and electric chairs, something that would knock the Law, as we know it, into a cocked hat!"

His voice was impassioned, but its evenness made the words decisive, cutting.

"That probably sounds queer from me after my critical attitude toward Miss Messenger's repugnance for mathematical certainties and schedules. Queerer still, coming from a lawyer. I couldn't begin to give details on how I arrived at my conclusion; only touch a few highlights. Albany Law School. Harvard. Usual stuff. Went in for criminal courts, and didn't fare badly—in four years Assistant D.A. in an upstate town.

"I DON'T know just what it was that first jolted me. Somewhere in my reading I came across a line—I think it's something from Ben Hecht—do you know *Erik Dorn*? *The guilt or innocence of a client depends on his choice of lawyer.* Something like that. Anyway, the idea stuck. Clever lawyer, client gets off easily or goes free. Poor lawyer, client is convicted. And the choice of lawyer was naturally limited to the client's pocketbook—save for certain instances where the big name boys would take an interest (and win sure publicity) in some unusual case.

"In other words, the best lawyers are the most expensive. Poor men can't afford expensive lawyers, only average lawyers. In which it boils down to the fact that a poor man with his poor lawyer stands a greater chance of conviction than a wealthy man with his expensive lawyer. And it isn't the client who's on trial in the courtroom, in effect it's the lawyer. The jury doesn't, to put it simply, try the defendant; it trys the lawyer's speech.

"Of course all this is old hat. Been gone over a thousand times before. Not perfect, but best system possible—that's the answer. Right ninety-nine cases out of a hundred. But how about that hundredth case? That was the idea that stuck with me. How about that hundredth individual who might be wronged? In the thousands of trials in our criminal-courts history, that hundred injustice would count up to many hundredth injustices. Still, one must take that chance for the common good—that's the answer to that.

"But how about in the instance of capital punishment? Where the lives of innocent men may be forfeit? After all, society isn't out to avenge itself against a criminal, it merely wishes protection from him. If it asks protection merely, why the electric chair? As a warning, a restraint to other criminals? But death threats have never restrained criminals in the old days of the wrack and the headsman, the torturer's boot and the fire, the most brutal exactions of the Law failed to restrain crime. And when it's a life-and-death matter, isn't it pretty ironical for guilt or innocence to depend on the ability of one's

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lawyer, which in turn depends on the defendant's ability to pay.

"All these are stock arguments, and I haven't anything new. Perhaps the novelty lies in the fact that I, an aspiring and somewhat successful young attorney, couldn't get them out of my mind. I began to notice instances in the court room—instances when defense lawyers with badly prepared cases jeopardized their clients, where someone else, with the same material well-prepared, might have won.

"Then the thing was brought closer to home. The D.A. was laid up with flu, and I was assigned to prosecute a murder case. Nothing spectacular. Just one of those mediocre, stupid homicides that might make the second page of a big metropolitan daily, sordid in its dreary mediocrity. Counter-man in a lunch car—you know the type—young, ambitionless—Italian parentage—named De Marco. Five-and-ten-cent-store wife—girl at a notions counter—going to have another baby. Totaled together, their incomes might have made twenty-five dollars a week, and there were all those back-payments on the installment-plan furniture. So De Marco borrowed a pistol, stuck up a pool room, and in the resulting fracas shot and killed the proprietor.

"The trial was dull as De Marco's brain. No color. So much drab detail. Defense tried to prove he didn't know there was a bullet in the gun, and I only had to produce a witness who'd seen the defendant stop to load the gun on the stairway up to the pool room. The slain man had been a popular figure in sporting and political circles; I asked for a first degree verdict, and I got it. De Marco went to the chair."

CARLYLE frowned at the knuckles of his left hand, gripping his knee. "There was no doubt the chap was guilty of homicide—someone lashed at him with a billiard cue, and in panic he started firing. The point is, he hadn't been able to afford a first-class defense-lawyer; his case was handled by a newcomer fresh out of school, a fellow who considered the case lost before he started, didn't want it anyway, and midway through the trial got himself badly tangled.

"Throughout the trial, I couldn't help seeing how much better I, myself, could have presented the defense. This point and that point—how I would've argued differently—the testimony about loading the gun; I'd have tried to prove the stairway too dark for a witness to have seen clearly—I'd have kept De Marco off the stand until a rash of pimples cleared from his face—I'd have had his young wife in court every day—dangled the infant in front of the jury.

"Cleverly handled, I was sure De Marco could have gotten off with second degree. Luck was against him—there'd been a number of gangster killings that year—feeling ran high—his lawyer bungled. But was that what determined justice? The whole thing bothered me. I went to the D.A. with my questions. He looked at me as the high priest of a church might look at an acolyte questioning a holy doctrine. Young tyros should not ask such questions. I should concern myself with my career. Meantime, I must have faith.

"But the worm of doubt had been born," Carlyle's features darkened. "Perhaps if I'd been a little more sophisticated, if I hadn't at first accepted the Law as God, hadn't believed so devoutly in the perfectly balanced scales of Justice, I'd have shrugged it off. In my childhood I'd been taught that Right was Right and Wrong was Wrong, there were no intermediate shadings, and the officer on the corner was a defender of Right. I don't know how I missed the healthy cynicism of college—too immersed in my books, I suppose—and when I went into the D.A.'s office, the Law had been as my Bible.

"So the first doubt came like a blow from behind, hurt more. I felt like the trusting sophomore who stumbles on his fiancée necking the football captain behind the chapel. I'd discovered my blindfolded goddess-with-the-scales holding hands with the Devil, and unlike my

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young colleagues, I'd never suspected her. My young colleagues could forgive her. The more disillusioned for the absolutism of my faith, I couldn't. I'm glad I couldn't."

Carlyle clenched his fist on his pipe. "I've always figured a woman who lets you down once will let you down again, unless you let her know she's hurt you and give her a darn good thrashing. Eh?" he chuckled unexpectedly at Mary Messenger. "Well, the goddess had let me down, and once suspicious, I couldn't get over it. Then I caught her *in flagrante delicto.*

"The D.A. sent up a man for the murder of his wife—a little Czech who practically convicted himself by all sorts of crazy testimony. To begin with he perjured all over the place about his whereabouts the night of the crime—his wife had had her head blown off by a shotgun—motive: jealousy over her affair with another man—the other man absolutely alibied from the fact he was in jail the week of the shooting.

"All evidence pointed to the Czech. He'd purchased the shotgun the day before. Openly threatened to slay his wife. Confessed to hating her. Had been late to the bus terminal—he was a bus driver—night of the murder. There was blood all over a new suit, admittedly his, found half-burned in the furnace. He'd been drunk and incoherent arriving at the bus terminal.

"Detectives never found the shotgun—a canal near the house was drained in the hunt—and there were no witnesses. But the circumstantial evidence was deadly. The Czech actually admitted at the last that he didn't know whether he'd done the job or not."

EASING back in his chair, Carlyle let his listeners wait until he'd fired his pipe and was smoking comfortably.

"Well," his eyes were ironic, "it was close. The morning before the Czech was to go to the chair, the shotgun turned up in a gangster shooting in Omaha, Nebraska. The thug, a drug addict, confessed. He'd known the Czech's wife in the old days in Chicago. Stopped off in our town to say hello. The woman had resisted the hoodlum's advances; he'd spied the shotgun under a davenport turned over in the fight, snatched up the weapon and slain her, then wiped his shoes on the first thing handy—her husband's new suit. Nobody'd seen him arrive—the house was isolated—or leave.

"The innocent Czech was reprieved in the nick of time. Turned out he'd been on a bender with a girl friend he was in love with, hadn't wanted to implicate her—she'd fled to Canada to hide—and, tight as a tick that night, didn't know for certain whether he'd killed his wife or not. But he wasn't guilty. Only luck had saved him. Twenty-four hours was too close a shave for my stomaching, especially as I'd worked hard to help convict. He was that hundredth case, and I wish you could have seen his face that day he was let out of prison."

Carlyle smiled gravely at a smoke-wreath coiling before his vision. "I resigned the D.A.'s office. No more capital punishment for me. Went in for commonplace practice. John Doe sueing Richard Roe over a matter of keeping chickens. But the bloom was pretty much off the peach. Civil actions or criminal—didn't the same flaw appear? It was good lawyer versus bad lawyer—not Right versus Wrong. I couldn't get that case of the innocent Czech out of my crop. Every murder trial after that sat on my conscience. Death sentences—when there's always that hundredth chance—or thousandth chance, for that matter—are too drastic. There's no reprieve for a man once he's sat in the chair."

Carlyle paused to adjust his pipe-stem, and there was an exasperated crackle from Adam Henry Clay's newspaper. The publisher was glaring across the top of the printed sheet.

"Just what would you advise?" the publisher snapped. "Turning all convicted murderers loose from their death-cells?

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Giving them air-cooled apartments and baseball games? I don't believe in coddling criminals."

"Nor I," Hammand Carlyle said coolly. "Give them hell. Hell to the average criminal is hard work. Make 'em pick potatoes from morning to night. Pitch hay. Hoe turnips. Manufacture shoes or sweat at laundry tubs or anything you like. Put them to something productive and keep them hard at it. Your true criminal hates honest work like poison. That's another angle. Man murders somebody and goes to the chair. Exit.

"Why not keep him alive; make him support the wife or family of the murdered man, contribute his prison earnings whatever little they might be. The argument that criminals in production keep honest men from employment wouldn't apply in the case of a murder where a life has been taken. Or in cases where a robber might be forced to repay a theft, that sort of thing. Meantime a man innocently convicted—that thousandth chance—would still have life."

CARLYLE waved his pipe emphatically. "But don't think I'd want to pamper the criminal. Gangsters, recidivists, vice czars—I'm for locking them in Alcatraz and keeping them there. Making it tough. It's the technicalities of Law that I'm against—the tricky legalities and complicated red tape—the sort of thing that sends a murderer to prison on a ten-year income-tax evasion charge while some boy gets ten years for carrying a gun. No, give the criminal what he deserves. It's the innocent man I want to protect."

"And do you think many innocent men are convicted?" the publisher snapped.

"Not many," Carlyle said frankly. "I'm only saying that where there's a chance of injustice—and a conviction means death—I want no part in it. I'm only saying that the Law has grown so tricky and complicated that a trial is a juggling match between two lawyers—our big criminal trials have turned into three ring circuses, and the facts of a case can't be established in the midst of ballyhoo, technical legalities and bedlam. Certainly if the guilty can get off Scot-free—and we know of many such cases—the opposite is possible: the innocent can be convicted."

Enfield, alertly attentive, asked: "Aren't juries, as a general rule, pretty reluctant to send a man to the chair, Mr. Carlyle?"

"In general, I should say yes. But does that establish the truth of a matter? Those twelve good men and true—butchers, bakers, candlestick makers—bombarded by the testimony of psychiatrists, physicians, ballistics experts, testimony often conflicting and framed in a terminology as foreign to the layman as astronomy—then swamped in a mass of legal sesquipedalia—finally harangued by a couple of showmen—how could they possibly arrive at the truth? Can fact ever be established in such a maze? Can fact ever be established about anything?"

He tapped his coat lapel with his pipestem. "I'm wearing a blue cheviot suit. To Miss Messenger it may appear black. To someone down the aisle, by certain light, it's tinged green. Three months from now, in a court room, three different answers are given. And it may be that I don't remember. How can twelve men, hearing such testimony, establish the truth in the matter? And a life may hang in the balance on just such a point in evidence.

"There you have," Carlyle shook his head, "the simplest sort of an illustration. In my book I'm giving examples. Taking a number of celebrated murder cases, a few so-called unsolved, and trying to show the possibility of three different answers in each case."

Mary Messenger asked, puzzled, "Three different answers?"

"I phrased it badly," Carlyle corrected. "I mean to say, I'm giving the prosecutor's story, the defendant's story, then the story of what really happened, what might have been the actual facts in the case. I'm using the famous Robinson Case for one—trying to show how Mrs. Robinson's claim of innocence *might* have been true. I believe there are these three angles

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to all such cases, and what actually occurred is never absolutely known. As in the case of the convicted Czech who couldn't account for his actions on the night of his wife's murder.

"I BELIEVE there are many cases where the truth can't be established because it isn't known, cases where it can't be told because if it was told it would never be believed. Like the case in this book I've been reading," Carlyle held up the novel for inspection. *"Galleons Reach,* by H. M. Tomlinson. Haven't been able to put it down since I started it this morning. It's fiction—a grand story—but it happens to explain just what I mean. Main character, Jim Colet, gets fed up with big business and a domineering boss. Jim's a sensitive, humane fellow; wants to put in a plea for some workmen about to be fired. The swinish boss bawls him out in his private office late one night; Jim in a fit of repugnance, as anyone might have done, taps the big boss on the chin, and to his astonishment, the big boss drops dead—probably from heart trouble. Jim didn't mean it, just an expression of his distaste for bluster and commercial brutality. How could he know old Perriam was apoplectic? Does that make him a murderer?

"In the eyes of the Law, technically, yes. Jim sighs and goes out to fetch a policeman. But the bobby yawns as he approaches; he can't give himself up to a yawning cop. After walking all night, he finds himself in dockland at Galleons Reach; somehow he wanders aboard a freighter, sails for Malaya. Does his job as purser on a ship that founders at sea, and carries on in the Malay jungles—a gentleman and a decent citizen—more thoughtful of his fellow man that most—yet the Law would hang him for murder.

"He's only a fiction character, of course, but I think," Carlyle tapped his pipe-stem on the book, "you can see what I mean. I've known cases in real life that were similar. It's what a man has in his heart that counts—what lawyers could prove—what judge and jury on earth could decide what a man has in his heart? I'm glad I picked up this book, for I'd rather thought of idling the winter here in Chile, and Jim Colet's fictional case has reminded me of my job. And I'm glad we played this game tonight, for it's crystallized my intention to return and finish writing my own book."

Hitching in his chair, Hammand Carlyle emptied his pipe in the chromium ashtray fastened to the chair-arm, thrust pipe into pocket, and concluded with a self-deprecatory smile, his mouth down at the corners, "Never give a lawyer an opening; he'll deliver an address. I'm afraid." he drew back his cuff to expose his wrist-watch, "I've lectured overtime. But there's the reason for my answer, and that's what I'd do with my last two hours. Try to finish writing my book about the injustices in our legal system which make it possible for an innocent man to die in the electric chair."

CHAPTER IV

"I'D TELL SOME PEOPLE—"

ENFIELD was aware, in the mute interval that followed Carlyle's speech, that the weather outside had grown worse. The wind had increased, driving the rain through the blackness in fitful squalls that smote the windows viciously. Puffs thumped against the door, rattling the loose handrails of the gangway. A draught from somewhere was dissipating the cabin's warmth, and Sordo, the steward, had come out of his cubby to close a ventilator. Despite concentration on the lawyer's unusual discourse, Enfield could not help a digressive thought for the pilot walking a lonely mountain trail in this rainstorm, his only guides a compass and a flashlight.

But the others in their cushioned lounge-chairs seemed to have temporarily forgotten the storm. The metal-walled compartment with its carpeted aisle, its shaded reading lamps, snug appurtenances and ivory panelling might have been a club lounge but for the glimpse of

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dials, shiny gauges and instruments seen through the door to the pilot's cockpit. The passengers down the aisle, absorbed by Carlyle's talk, continued to regard him inquiringly. Portly Mr. Clay and stiff-lipped Mrs. Piedmont Lennington wore expressions of disaccord and censure.

Had the man made his talk purposely provocative, Enfield wondered. Spoken merely to keep his hearers interested? He didn't seem the type to unburden himself freely before some chance-gathered audience, even in the interests of a game. On the other hand, his manner evinced sincerity; his speech had been straightforward and delivered with an underlying forcefulness that implied deep feeling.

In an emergency he would be a good man, Enfield decided. As an enemy he could be dangerous. His reticence had not been wholly dispelled by his talk; his smile was disarming, and he could converse engagingly; but there was steel somewhere about the man, steel sheathed.

"Well," Carlyle folded his arms, resuming a comfortable posture, "I hope I didn't use up more than my share of the time. Does that let me out of paying a forfeit, Miss Messenger?"

"I should say!" she told him. "You were terribly interesting."

"Then who's next? Do we go down one side of the aisle and up the other, or in rotation back and across?"

As this brought no response from the stony-lipped woman at his left, Carlyle aimed a smile at the portly man seated opposite.

"Mr. Clay? I guess it's your turn."

"Turn?" the publisher at Enfield's side scowled.

"Why, yes," Miss Messenger reminded brightly, "we're playing Truth and Consequences. You must tell as honestly as you can what you'd do if—"

"I'm afraid, young woman, I'm not interested."

"Well, I am." It was the woman in blue fox, once more coming back into the conversation where Adam Henry Clay had bluntly refused to participate. This time her attitude was even more belligerent; there was a combative light to her heavily-lidded eyes, her lips were smiling angrily and the thrust of her chin was not pleasant. From sullen, her expression had gone truculent. Enfield was warned by the glinty directness of her stare, the crimson smouldering under her rouge, and the prim way in which she arranged her expensive furs, then let them slop down over one shoulder again. The thin-stemmed glass at her elbow had been filled and drained with increasing frequency during the past half hour, and Miss Royce had not mellowed from the process.

"I'm interested," she declared in a tone that left a hearer in little doubt. "If Mr. Clay won't play in your game," she nodded at Miss Messenger, "I will. I answered for Mr. Clay, anyway, before. His last two hours, he—"

"Millicent," the publisher's voice was a plea.

She wheeled at him fiercely. "You would. You'd spend your last two hours playing Napoleon. Now I'm going to tell you how I'd spend *my* last two hours. It's my turn, isn't it? Listen, if a—"

"Millicent, for heaven's sake!"

She glared.

"If a school teacher can speak her mind and this lawyer can tell what he thinks, I guess I can. *Charles!*" her demand whipped the length of the aisle like a pistol-crack, producing Mr. Clay's valet in the doorway to the steward's cubby as if he'd been jerked there by an invisible string. "Charles, fill this cocktail shaker. If the Bacardi is all gone, tell that steward to trot out some more. Now then—"

"Millicent," the portly man whispered savagely, "will you listen to me?"

"You're not playing in this game." She shook her head determinedly. "It's my turn. These people want to know how I'd spend my last two hours, see? All right. I'm supposed to answer honestly, and I will. If I knew I had only two hours left, I'd do plenty. I'd begin by telling a lot of snooty people to go to hell. Some of them are right here on this plane—"

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MILLICENT ROYCE rose stiffly to her feet and took a bellicose stand before her chair, hands on hips, shoulders back, eyes scornful under a curl of peroxided hair that had come loose from under her hatbrim. There was smartness and tact in the powder-blue traveling suit with its trim bolero jacket, Enfield thought, but the mass of furs askew on one shoulder, the too-youthful hat, the gold bracelet jangling a fringe of tiny amulets, and the ox-blood fingernails pointed like a Chinese scholar's were probably the Pike's Peak of bad taste. Why was it these high-powered autocrats, masters of wealth and industry, so often attached to themselves some sharp-clawed Angora? Millicent Royce was a difficult and expensive toy. Side-glancing at the millionaire publisher whose face was a crimson scowl of wrath and apprehension, Enfield considered Napoleon and Josephine a good analogy.

"Well?" the woman's voice was metallic to match the jangle of her bracelet. "Isn't somebody going to say something?"

If hauteur could kill, the stare from Mrs. Piedmont Lennington should have slain the speaker on the spot. From the other women there was a general throat-clearing and averting of eyes in embarrassment. Hammand Carlyle shot Enfield a questioning look; the fuzzy-haired man and Mr. Earwig had recoiled in their chairs, and if the others farther down the aisle had thought to say anything, they evidently considered discretion the better part of valor.

"Aren't *you* going to say something?" the woman's eyes sneered down at Adam Henry Clay.

The publisher started a restraining gesture. "Millicent," menacingly through his teeth, "you're making a fool of yourself. Sit down!"

"Am I making a fool of myself?" she glared at Enfield.

His smile appealed for moderation. "We're playing a game, Miss Royce—"

"That's right." She laughed harshly. "Truth and Consequences. And it's my turn, isn't it? I'm playing the game, aren't I?" She swerved to confront the passengers across the aisle. "You've heard my answer—I'd spend my last two hours, if I had the chance, telling a lot of highbrow people and society dames that go around looking at people as if they were swill or something, to go to hell."

She swayed a little, balanced, laughed jarringly. "Say, all my life I've been waiting for a chance to tell a few people off. Like this arithmetic teacher, here, who's always wanted the figures to come out different for once. I don't blame you, sister," she addressed Mary Messenger gruffly, "only that routine you wanted to get away from makes me laugh. Say, you were fed up with having to be on time for meals. That's good. When I was a kid, half the time there *wasn't* any meals!

"Maybe you don't know it," Millicent Royce squinted angrily down the aisle, "but my name isn't Millicent Royce, as it was in the films, and it wasn't Milly Roper as the screen magazines said it was, either. Huh. I was born Sophie Solensky—my old man was Polish—only it didn't take me long to find out you couldn't get far in the old U.S.A. with a name like Solensky, understand? Sure, all these good Democrats and Republicans in America where all men are free and equal, they'd raise their eyebrows right up over their hats at a name like Solensky.

"MY OLD man was a coal miner in Scranton, Pa. It wasn't his fault that half the time there weren't any meals. He didn't drink and he didn't sport around. He worked his head off—when he could get it. My mother worked, too. She could take it. Six kids and took in laundry and went around scrubbing from morning to night trying to keep the damn coal-dust out of the house. She kept the family together, looked after the old man when he was sick, made my brothers go to school. Went to mass regular, and in the early days when she was the best looking woman in The Notch she never looked at another man but Solensky.

"He was a good man," Millicent Royce

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said fiercely, "but do you think he could get out of debt? Not and be honest, he couldn't. He had a chance once to get some big money for sabotage in the company mine, and another time he could've been a union organizer, but he didn't want strikes, he wanted honest work. Where did his honesty get him? I'll tell you where it got him. Out on his clunk every time the owners shut down. In hock to the company stores. In debt for the shack we lived in which was owned by the company. In the hole for everything, until finally he was broke flat, and laid up besides with a pair of coal-dust lungs. And so what?"

Balancing carefully, Millicent Royce snatched up the cocktail shaker which had been replenished by the noiseless Charles, poured a glass to the brim, and took the *daiquiri* in two big swallows, only wetting her hand a little.

She repeated vehemently, "So what? So the charity workers—these mine owners' wives and daughters, church dames, women of the local big shots came to the house. My old man was broke and out of work, and they'd bring a basket of food. Sundays they'd go driving through The Notch on their way to get into the mountains or the country club with their noses in the air—they wouldn't even *see* the house we lived in. Mondays they'd come all smiles and sympathy, bringing the left-over food from their picnics.

"They make me sick," Millicent Royce lashed out, "just to think of them. Pulling aside their skirts as they came in our lousy parlor. Wrinkling their noses at the smell of potato soup. They'd praise my mother for keeping up courage; they thought the Polish pictures on the wall were interesting and quaint; they'd pat me on the head and say, 'Nice little girl.' I thought they were wonderful. The men were like great kings with their big shiny automobiles stopping at our dirty gate, and the women in their starchy dresses and crisp new bonnets were like queens out of fairly tales. I thought they were sweet and beautiful and good."

Her eyes jeered at this memory, and her features hardened on a caustic: "Oh, I suppose they meant well. One of them wasn't so bad. Used to bring me dresses—the outgrown middies and party frocks of her own dear little girl. They were fresh-laundered, of course, and I thought they were new. The good lady really meant to be kind. She invited me to come to her little daughter's birthday party. My! It was way the other side of town, and there was going to be ice cream. They'd send the car with a chauffeur to fetch me.

"Can you imagine what that meant to a kid who'd been raised on a pile of black slag? I was seven or eight years old, but I can remember how I looked forward to that party as if it was yesterday. Say, I dreamed about that party. The morning it came to go, I was scrubbed and dressed and ready by ten o'clock, and it wasn't to be till four. I had a pink frock with white polkadots and a big pink bow in back, and my mother spent an hour plaiting my pigtails and tying pink hair-ribbons. I was so excited I couldn't sit still, and I sat by the front window afraid to move, for fear the chauffeur would drive up and wouldn't see me."

SHE paused, breathing angrily. Put out a hand to steady herself. "Say, if you think a kid seven years old can't remember—Well, it came to me. A Locomobile and a chauffeur. The pumpkin coach after Cinderella. Little Sophie Solensky was going to meet the nice little ladies on the other side of the tracks, the nice little boys who went to dancing school. Little Sophie Solensky was going to eat ice cream.

"There was a great green lawn, I remember, a little different from the mountains of coal around The Notch. A lot of terraces that seemed like a park, and big cool bushes everywhere, and shrubs. There was a long table with a white cloth, and an ice cream freezer and millions of cookies. And Japanese lanterns, and those things you pulled that went *bang*, with a prize inside.

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"This lady met me at the house and took me by the hand across the lawn. They were playing Drop the Handkerchief; about twenty of these kids. The boys in Lord Fauntleroy suits, and the little girls so dainty and polite. I didn't know how to play, so after the lady went away, I just stood back and watched. Pretty soon one of the boys came up and asked if I'd play tag with him. I said yes, and he asked me my name. I said Solensky. He asked me to repeat it, and I said it again. "That's a funny kind of name," he said, and shouted at the others to hear it. They all stood around me, asking me to tell it, and then they repeated it and began to all yell it together."

Millicent Royce jangled the bracelet on her wrist. "It kind of scared me. I don't know how they knew I was different, but they did, those little princes. 'Solensky! Solensky! Solensky!' I wanted to run and hide, but there wasn't any place to go. Then one of the older boys said I must be a Bohunk. I didn't know what that was. I don't know why I'd never heard it before. They joined hands and danced around me, calling, 'Bohunk! Bohunk!' It sounded like something terrible.

"Then," Millicent Royce clenched out, "the little girl who was having the birthday party came mincing up. All the sudden she was pointing at me. 'Why, that's *my* party frock!' I can hear her yet, trilling in a voice of phony surprise, like these brat actors on the screen. 'She's got one of my dresses on!'

"I said it wasn't true, and she said it was. All the nice little children began to giggle and dance and hop around me, and that brat kept pointing, 'She's wearing *my* dress! She's wearing *my* dress!' Say, listen!" Millicent Royce swerved her eyes at Mary Messenger. "Do you think you ever had anything in your life like that! I'll tell you something. I was scared out of my wits for a few minutes, so scared I wanted to die. I tried to run, and some boy pushed me back. I grabbed up a dish of ice cream and slammed it into his face where it belonged. I grabbed up another dish and let that girl have it in the face, too.

"You never heard such screaming, but by that time I was too terrified to care. All I wanted to do was get off that filthy dress, and get away from that awful place and get home.

"Yeah, I tore it off. I ripped off that dress and threw it on the grass. I guess I didn't have much on under it. All the brats were pointing and screaming, and the kid's mother rushed out of the house and got me by the arm. She had that look on her face. Highbrow horror. The look you get from people who think they're too grand to associate with you, who don't think your name is in the Blue Book, who criticize your clothes and morals. The look I've been getting from a couple of you people right here on this plane—"

Her stare, baleful, narrow-lidded, focussed on the mother and daughter across the aisle. Lips curled virulently, she looked Mrs. Piedmont Lennington up and down, while her hand dug into the pocket of her bolero jacket for her cigarettes. Swaying stiffly, her eyes never leaving the elder woman, she picked a Russian cigarette from the jeweled case, thrust it into a corner of her mouth, fired it with the lighter, and closed the case with an angry snap.

"Who," she expelled with a breath of smoke, her glare still fixed on Mrs. Piedmont Lennington, "do you think you are?" She stabbed the case back into her jacket pocket; squinted through smoke. The cigarette wagged in her lips as she repeated, "Just who in hoopla d'you think you are?"

"MILLICENT!" Adam Henry Clay was hoarse with mortification.

"Oh, don't try to stop me!" she struck off his outreached hand. "I'm going through with this, big boy; it's something about me you don't happen to know. All you know about me is you saw me in burlesque and you put me—with a couple of strings attached to it—into pictures. Everybody knows you did a lot for me; sure, you've been buttering yourself over

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with sanctimonious feelings of philanthropy ever since. Nuts!" she scathed him. "You got your money back on the investment in those films, didn't you? I guess you never gave a nickel in those big philanthropies of yours that you didn't get it back in publicity or good business."

"Millicent, if you want these people—"

"What makes you believe they don't know about it already? All your editors and managers go around yessing you to death, but the public isn't quite such a dope as you'd believe. And don't puff up like Napoleon at me. You and your charities. You and your editorials about morals. I'll tell you something, and it goes for that dame across the aisle, too.

"Ever since the plane took off this morning," Millicent Royce panted, pointing her cigarette at Mrs. Piedmont Lennington, "you and that debutante of yours have been staring at me like I was something fit for a can of Flit. You weren't exactly friendly on the cruise ship, either. Don't think I didn't notice. That upstage nose. Lorgnette stuff. We're the Piedmont Lenningtons of Montclair, Palm Beach and Saint Vincent's church, and you're just a Hollywood fadeout who once played a part in a feature with Bessie Barriscale—that expression.

"I ought to've slapped a *daiquiri* at you, like I caught that snooty kid once in the face with some vanilla ice cream. Criticizing these furs and how I got 'em, and my name. Well, my name was Solensky, and if you two D.A.R's. want to know it, my great great grandfather was a Polish colonel came over with Kosckiusco to fight for George Washington. All you snobs know Lafayette, because it's smart to know French, but you've forgot Kosciuszko. The Solenskys were here during the Revolution, if you're going to get smug about names.

"And before the rest of you get smug, don't think I haven't caught your glances, too. You're the moral ones. Well, maybe you never had a dress razzed off you by a bunch of little ladies and gentlemen. I made 'em pay for it, afterwards," Millicent Royce said huskily. "I made 'em pay to see me do a strip act after that, and I made some of 'em pay plenty. But I'm sick of good ladies raising their eyebrows into their hair at me—damn sick! I'm just telling you what I'd do with my last two hours."

Knocking the peroxided curl away from her eyes, she tilted backward, caught the chair-arm for support, glared around her.

Her words came hoarse, impassioned. "I'd corner a few more of these smug society dames who've married almost as many times as I have, and done plenty worse, and I'd tell the lot of them where to get off. I guess you and your daughter," she flung at Mrs. Piedmont Lennington, "know where I mean. As for you," she wheeled on Adam Henry Clay, "I'd tell you a few that I wouldn't bore these people tonight with—and while we're on the subject of this plane, I didn't come on it because of that Spanish pilot—although God knows he's good-looking—I came because I'm sick to death of traveling with you in private cars, suites and airplanes and listening to you howl about the market all the time.

"And I'd save my last few minutes," she ended huskily, "to press that magic button and go back to that birthday party I told you about. I'd go back to that birthday party, and I'd lam those snobby little aristocrats into the middle of next week. That boy who jeered at my name, I'd grind his nose in the dirt. And I'd stuff that charity dress down the throat of that little brat who owned it, and make her stand up there on that table in front of everybody and do a strip tease—"

Millicent Royce's arm gave way at the elbow. Jolting down into her chair, she covered her face with her blue fox furs, and burst into tears.

CHAPTER V

A LITTLE MATTER OF VIRTUE

FORTUNATELY the co-pilot entered the scene at this juncture, and gave those passengers not directly concerned

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with Miss Royce's tirade a chance to avert abashed eyes. The man brought in with him a gust of night and cold spray; for a moment the lounge compartment was filled with wet wind and the sound of weather; the slam of the hastily closed door muted the choky sobs of the woman who sat with her face buried in her furs.

A short-legged, puffy, round-stomached individual with rosy cheeks and winky china-blue eyes, not at all the conventional airman type, the co-pilot greeted the passengers with that abstract head-bob of one estranged by the barrier of language; bustled out of his dripping oilskins; hung the coat over his arm, and turned his head to sneeze.

The German co-pilot's sneeze, answered by an automatic, *"Gesundheit!"* from the German passenger seated amidships, made a welcome diversion. The flyer's winky eyes were glad to see a compatriot among the passengers. He addressed the traveling salesman in German—Enfield caught a reference to the weather—and was answered volubly. The traveling man gave his name as Heinrich Gerstner, and it was evident from his vigorous utterances and unfriendly glower that he was blaming the co-pilot for some share in the airliner's misadventure.

The interruption was abbreviated thereby, for the co-pilot was indisposed to argue with a passenger. Bluntly advising his critic that such complaints should be made to the main office, he summoned the steward to bring coffee, and retired, muttering, into the privacy of the pilot's cockpit.

The atmosphere was again controversial, strained. Gerstner, sulking back in his chair, clapping on his hat and pulling the brim down over his eyes. Millicent Royce continuing to cry in her furs. Mrs. Piedmont Lennington sitting stiff-featured, affronted, handkerchief to nose defensively.

At Enfield's elbow, the portly Adam Henry Clay was scarlet from ears to collar. Smoke fuming from his chewed cigar might have issued from his forehead. He shot Enfield a stinging look that held him responsible for this fiasco, and withdrew in fury behind a spread of editorials, leaving Miss Messenger to cross the aisle in solicitude to rescue a foxtail awash in Miss Royce's *daiquiri* glass.

For this friendly gesture Miss Royce offered no response, and Mary Messenger retired to her chair with an expression that appealed to Hammand Carlyle for help. But the quiet man obviously wanted no part in what he considered another man's responsibility.

The sound of choky sobbing continued an atmosphere of strain in which the fuzzy-haired man at Miss Royce's right quit his chair and hurried forward to the ice-water cooler; Mrs. Earwig looked about her in distress; Mr. Earwig blew his nose and polished his glasses; the solitaire-player at the aisle's end went on with his game, and the elderly gentleman opposite, after opening his eyes to send Miss Royce a kindly glance, politely averted his attention to fitting a cigarette into an ivory holder.

Enfield had always been uncomfortably at a loss when confronted by a lady's weeping. Especially when the tears were three parts alcohol. He hoped Miss Royce was not immersed in a crying jag, and he was inclined to feel sorry for her—provided her story were true. He was not sure, as some were certain, that one's capacity for truth expanded in direct proportion to the amount of alcohol consumed. Too, Miss Royce's undoubted dramatic talent should be taken into account.

BUT there had been nothing overdrawn in her little autobiography; to Enfield it had sounded wholly credible, and there was no doubt about the woman's hatred of those (and there must have been many in her past) who had snubbed her. Was it Shakespeare or the Bible—*"Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."* Funny about that birthday party—if it wasn't some left-over memory from the Vitagraph lot—funny how a rancor like that could stay with one's life, motivate

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a part of one's destiny, or lie locked in someone's subconscious perhaps to break out one day with the violence of spontaneous combustion, causing an outburst like Miss Royce's, or, as was sometimes the case, a berserk explosion, sudden insanity, even murder.

Enfield rejected this last thought with a mental headshake, and considered the distressed expressions among the passengers in some anxiety. Certainly Miss Royce's story had not put these people at their ease; and he was afraid this unhappy episode had terminated the game.

"Look here," he touched the sleeve of the steward who was on his way to the pilot's cockpit with a thermos bottle. "Let's have some more hot coffee and some of those sandwiches, will you, Sordo? I'm sure," he smiled engagingly across the aisle, "that the ladies—Miss Messenger?—Mrs. Lennington?—would like some."

Mary Messenger responded, "Oh, please," enthusiastically; but Mrs. Piedmont Lennington merely permitted her jaw-muscles to twitch.

"Be a good sport, Mother," Rowena surprised Enfield by urging. "After all, we're playing a game and the rules call for truthful answers. I must say, I've been quite fascinated by this idea of speaking one's mind. I can't help but admire frankness and candor," her glance at Miss Royce was good-humored, if a bit rueful, "it's so seldom one hears it any more."

This won her a quick, complimentary head-lift from the card player; his wiry features whimsical with a dry, side-quirked smile, his eyes awarding the girl a sardonic twinkle of approval.

The atmosphere of contention was at once relaxed; there was a general sighing and easing back in chairs; the fuzzy-haired man with the glasses returned to his seat; Miss Royce had lifted a sullen tear-blemished face from her furs to defiantly rearrange it behind the silver mirror of her compact.

But Mrs. Piedmont Lennington was unconquerable.

"If you think, Rowena, that I intend to be humiliated—"

Rowena Lennington patted her mother's elbow. "Look, Mother, we're all in the same boat. It isn't often you get a chance to hear what people really think, much less tell them a bit of the same. Honestly, I've been perfectly fascinated."

She stood up, slim, assured, at ease in the self-confidence of good tailoring; thrust her hands in the pockets of her black tweed coat, and told her listeners: "Why, it's been just like meeting a lot of people for the first time. You see people on shipboard and so on, but you never actually know who they are. I've known some men for years, but they've never been anything but a suit of clothes, some oxford shoes, a shirt, tie, collar; a hat with a face under it. They have voices, but they never actually say anything. I suppose they know me as a dress and some hose supported by a pair of I. Miller's—at least that's what some of them seem to think I'm made of, judging from their conversation. I'd like to have played this game with some of them, that's a fact."

SHE looked around her, smiling. "Only most of them wouldn't have had anything to say. Nothing nearly as interesting as Miss Messenger or Mr. Carlyle or Miss Royce. I haven't been able to keep from wondering what the rest of you would have to say. Honestly. Here we are—more or less strangers—thrown together for a night—it's like *The Canterbury Tales* in modern setting. Mr. Enfield couldn't have asked a better question, it seems to me. Really, Mother," she turned, "I can't imagine what your answer might be."

"My answer?"

"It's your turn," the girl persisted lightly. "What would you do with your last two hours?" Admonishing with upheld finger. "Play fair."

Mrs. Piedmont Lennington said in an astringent voice, "Rowena, I can't think what's come over you. Not that I'd ever consent to answer such a ridiculous question—the answer should be apparent to

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everybody, I should certainly believe. A person's place at such a time would obviously be in church—"

"Now, Mother!"

"—making one's peace with one's God," Mrs. Piedmont Lennington said rigidly. "I'm surprised, Rowena, that you could have believed me capable of another answer. One might suspect your upbringing had been among pagans."

Rising as she spoke, Mrs. Piedmont Lennington swept the lounge chairs with a censorious glance, pressed brittle lips together in the manner of one withholding a righteous Philippic, and walked majestically to the twin doors abaft of the steward's cubby, vanishing through the door marked *Caballeros*. To reappear almost instantly, and vanish through the door designated *Señoras*.

Rowena Lennington chuckled, "She's a good sport, really, and I've an idea she's getting a bigger kick out of this trip than she'd think it would be dignified to admit. You see, father died last year. We'd done a lot of traveling, but he always ran the show—this is the first time she's been, so to speak, on her own."

She looked over her shoulder indulgently. "I fancy mother's uneasy about being on this jaunt with me—still thinks of me as a girl in pinafores, although I've barged around Europe by myself a lot—mistrusts women as flighty—the weaker sex—place is in the home—that sort of thing. Now she feels she has to look after me, and I think she resents it a little. Rather I'd been a boy who could look after myself. The disappointment of her life that she never had a son."

Enfield, in the act of lighting a cigarette, looked up.

Catching his attentiveness, "Oh, please don't think I'm implying my mother has a complex of some kind," Rowena Lennington requested. "It's just that she's old school—draws the old-school line between masculine and feminine—none of your woman's suffrage and Lucy Stone League for mother. She tries to admire women in business, actresses, women columnists and golf pros and restaurant hostesses, but she can't. They just aren't ladies to her, that's all. They aren't feminine. She thinks of them as Dr. Mary Walker wearing pants. You see," she pointed out to Millicent Royce, in answer to a hard-eyed glare, "mother's another generation, riding sidesaddle and all that."

Miss Royce said nothing and Rowena Lennington went on: "Naturally, mother thinks men could do all those jobs better than women. You won't think I'm discussing her—it's the viewpoint I'm indicating—that women are on one side of the fence, men on the other. Girls are—well, they're girls. Born to wear dresses, play with dolls, graduate from finishing school, practice the piano, make polite wives and rear babies. Boys are boys: wear knickerbockers, climb trees, get into fistfights, make the football team, start at the bottom in business and climb to a thundering success. Men must work and women must weep—that sort of thing. That's why she'd have liked a son, because she admires men and their superiority no end. Women are only good for the gentle arts—must never overstep, particularly in the matter of virtue."

"WHY," Mrs. Earwig broke in unexpectedly, in a fluttery voice, "I think that's very nice." A shy-eyed, quaintish little person, she had been sitting back so unobtrusively holding hands with her husband, that Enfield had not imagined to hear from her at all.

"Of course it is," the tall girl said, "except that the implication—that all males are essentially brutes, and that women are by nature as virtuous as Snow White—isn't true. That's what I was brought up to think, though. Men were this way, women were that way. Of course there was a select class among the men—knights, business men, the members of father's club, particularly Englishmen—who had learned to bridle their—well—lower instincts. I, of course, wasn't supposed to inquire into such matters anyway. I vaguely resented the idea that men were

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in some way mysteriously superior, even in the self-control required to keep them in line, but I accepted the theory of my inherent virtue as unquestionable. It was a shock to me to learn that I had any—" she flushed a little—"any feelings."

Enfield, who had been listening carefully, was nettled at the steward for appearing at this point with sandwiches and coffee for himself and Miss Messenger.

Enfield chafed at the steward's puttering—with Spanish punctilio the man served a sandwich as if it were a banquet—but the steward's annoying interruption chanced a startling disclosure. Having draped Enfield's knee with napkin, tray and cutlery, Sordo concluded the fuss by emptying Enfield's ashtray.

As he lifted the chromium saucer from its bracket on the arm of Enfield's chair, something that resembled a dead butterfly—which had been crushed under the ashtray—fluttered to the floor. It was not a dead butterfly. Quick as the jolt that went through him, Enfield put his foot over the wing-like scrap, dropped his napkin over his shoe.

"I've got it," he told the steward. Then, as he recovered the napkin, "Thanks, the sandwiches are excellent, and bring me some cigarettes, will you? Don't bother about the ashtray—didn't you empty it a while ago?"

"Not since the stop at San Luis del Monte, *señor*."

"Reminds me—you didn't happen to see my ticket when you were cleaning up around my chair at that time? I can't find the stub," he lied smoothly, "and I thought I might've absent-mindedly stuck it under the ashtray."

"I did not see it, *señor*. There was nothing under the ashtray."

Enfield remembered—the man had been sprucing up the cabin as the passengers filed out for lunch. A cord began to tick in his throat.

Rowena Lennington was discussing her feelings again; Mrs. Piedmont Lennington was decorously returning up the aisle to her chair; the rain droned down. But the tall girl's voice was a blur on Enfield's hearing, the movement in the cabin was out of focus. He was looking down, unobserved, at something secreted in a fold of his napkin, something which at first glance might have been taken for a dead butterfly, but under inspection was seen to be a scrap of cherry-colored silk flowered with pale blue forget-me-nots.

It could not have been under that ashtray by accident; it must have come there by design. Had it been planted by someone lurking around the field at San Luis del Monte? Or was there, among these thirteen passengers, a murderer?

And at that moment the words of the tall girl across the aisle shocked into his consciousness.

"—And I believed so much in man's inherent brute nature—I believed so much in the supreme illusion of feminine virtue—" Rowena Lennington was saying "—that I killed a man for it!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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The Maid spoke in a terrible voice. "Again, Gilles, you have betrayed me"

A Story of the Halfway House

Bluebeard's Closet

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Author of "The Vase of Heaven and Earth," "The Hand of Glory," etc.

Gilles de Rais—men called him Bluebeard—will go down in history as the man who sold Jeanne d'Arc to the stake. And there is a legend that the Maid returned to life, years later, to confront her betrayer

IBRAHIM BIN MERT sounds like an Egyptian name, and so it is. Ibrahim came from Cairo originally, but has lived most of his life in Paris and in the Middle Ages. That is, he lives in Paris and studies the life and customs of the Middle Ages; he has degrees from various universities, and for several years has been writing a monumental life of Jeanne d'Arc.

I met him at a luncheon in the East. He was a handsome man of perhaps forty, and had come to this country to receive an honorary degree from one of our big universities, for his research work. As we chatted, he turned to me with an odd expression.

"Just what is this Halfway House?" he asked. "I've heard some singular things about it. A collection of occult objects and curios, I believe."

"It's *the* collection," I replied. "Sir Roger Balke gathered it, and remodeled an old brownstone mansion of the nineties to house it as a free foundation, open to the public. It contains anything and everything relating to the occult. You know Sir Roger?"

It was an idle stupid question. Balke is an outstanding mystery, never interviewed or photographed. He shuns publicity. His very whereabouts is never known. An Englishman of great wealth, he has lived all over the world and made a study of

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magic and magicians. He is said to hold an intense hatred of all charlatans and tricksters.

I was astonished when Ibrahim nodded quietly. "I never met him, but I have an invitation from him to visit the museum. It states that some interesting material on Jeanne d'Arc is at my disposition. She happens to be my specialty, you know," he added with a smile.

"An invitation? You are in luck!" I answered. "If you like, I'll take you around this afternoon. It'll give us an excuse to get away from this unspeakable feast. And frankly, I'm curious. I know Halfway House rather well; I have seen some remarkable happenings there. Sir Roger has carried out really amazing experiments with lightning, moving pictures, and so forth."

Ibrahim—he had some sort of title, but I do not recall it—agreed at once.

We walked. And on the way, I expressed surprise that Halfway House could have any connection with Jeanne d'Arc.

My companion smiled. "On the contrary. She was one pure and saintly flower in a horribly evil period, when the most malignant forms of black magic flourished. Do you recollect an old French nursery rhyme with refrain. *'Anne, masoeur Anne, ne vois-tu rien venir?'* Which every child in France used to learn?"

"Why, yes," I said. " 'Sister Anne, do you see anybody coming?' Sure! But that's in a fairy tale. Bluebeard."

"Precisely. And like most nursery rhymes, it has a surprising basis of fact. Bluebeard was a real person. Do you recall the strange influence of Jeanne on the men around her—the French knights and barons? She turned them from a pack of plundering, murderous blackguards into Christian heroes, while she lived. And after her death, most of them became worse than ever."

I nodded. "Yes. I remember Mark Twain called her time the rottenest period of human existence. Perhaps he exaggerated."

"Not a bit of it," said Ibrahim emphatically. "I suppose you know what became of the Maid of Orleans?".

"Naturally," and I laughed. "She was captured by the English—betrayed, some say. She was tried, and burned in the market-place of Rouen by the English and their French allies."

"I doubt very much if she was," said my companion gravely. "Did you ever hear that long after her death an imposter appeared who claimed to be Jeanne?"

I vaguely recalled some such story, and said so. Ibrahim nodded.

"It's an historic fact. Another is the mystic influence of Jeanne over those harsh, bloody marauders. She actually sanctified everyone who came into contact with her. Her knights gave up swearing and cursing at her command. Whether the shepherdess of Domrémy really had some tremendous power from Heaven, I don't know; but she had some sort of power. She was saintly, but her influence did not last. The Frenchmen who let her die came to a bad end, every one of them. And the worst of all came to the man whom she raised to power, and who betrayed her. Gilles de Rais, Marshal of France. While with her, he was a paragon of chivalry. He was her bodyguard, for some time."

"Gilles de Rais?" I repeated. "Wasn't he the original of Bluebeard?"

My companion laughed. "Exactly. An amateur sorcerer; a wizard. And so we come back to the nursery rhyme! After Jeanne died, Gilles de Rais went completely to the bad. He, I imagine, is the connection with Halfway House."

"And here's Halfway House itself."

We turned into what was now the museum. The attendant at the door took our things, and then addressed my companion by name.

"I was to ask you to step upstairs, sir, when you came."

"How did you know my name?" demanded Ibrahim. The attendant merely smiled, and gestured toward the stairs.

We crossed through the museum rooms to the stairway. Not a soul was about.

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The upper floor was quite deserted. The lecture hall with its comfortable seats held not a soul. But, on the high blank wall facing the entrance, was a superb painting, gloriously lighted.

My companion caught my arm, with an astonished ejaculation. "What did I tell you? Look! That's the Castle of Tiffauges, where Gilles de Rais lived when at the height of his power and wickedness! Look —look!"

The picture moved, flashed away, disappeared. As we dropped into chairs, a face grew upon the wall, a figure, a man sitting. A gaunt, burly man, massive of frame and face, with hell looking out of his haunted eyes. Cheeks shaven, but bluish with the intensely black beard. He moved, he stood up, he spoke. . . .

•

THIS was Gilles de Rais, in his castle on the Sévres River. He listened to a strange tale told by his lieutenant, Jean d'Héricourt.

The three of them were masters in this castle. Gilles, his boon companion, Sir Roger de Briqueville, and this Jean d'Héricourt. And all three of them were devils, literally: men who had turned to the worship of Satan and sorcery.

Gilles was just back from a foray with Sir Roger. They had ravaged far across the Loire, burning chateaux, laying waste villages, killing peasants. They returned with cattle and horses and plunder, with fresh women for the pleasure of their men-at-arms; and certain of the girls who had gone into the Black Tower where Gilles lived.

Jean d'Héricourt, however, had arrived home bootyless, and told why. Gilles de Rais, half drunk as he always was these days, cursed his friend and lieutenant savagely.

"Failed, eh? Nothing to show for the ride—damn your excuses! What's that about bringing home a man, an Englishman?"

Héricourt was a sly but powerful fellow, a devotee of Black Art and a man of some education. He was lean, hungry, vicious of eye and heart. "The Englishman's in the courtyard; he has messages for you from the Duc Jean of Brittany, and the Duc d'Anjou. And she'll be here before sunset, herself."

"She? Who?" demanded Gilles, his fuddled brain clearing slightly.

"The woman I've been telling you about, confound it! The woman we met, who ordered us to release our captives and return here—are you too drunk to know what I've been saying? The woman who called herself Jeanne d'Arc."

The savage features of Gilles went blank. "Are you mad? Jeanne was burned three—four years ago! Briqueville helped to burn her, when he was serving with the English. He commanded the guard the day she died, you fool!"

Héricourt shrugged. Sir Roger de Briqueville approached them, a huge flagon of wine in hand, a roaring obscene jest on his lips. "Talking about me, are you? Out with it, Gilles! What's the joke?"

Gilles glared at him. "Héricourt says Jeanne d'Arc is on the way here and will arrive before evening. She met him and turned him back." He turned to his lieutenant. "Get out of here! Send that Englishman along—let him wait ten minutes till I sober."

Héricourt left the room. Briqueville staggered, sat down suddenly, and the flagon slipped from his fingers to crash on the stones and spill the wine.

"I've been afraid of this," he muttered. "Yes, I saw her burned, after you sold her to us. And now she's come back. I knew she'd come back some day."

The Norman's air was wild, his eyes rolled hideously.

Gilles rapped out an oath. "You imbecile, I'm not talking about ghosts!"

"Neither am I."

With a groan, Briqueville rose and staggered away. Gilles stared after him, for he had seldom known a more callous man of blood than this Norman. Briqueville had almost as many murders on his

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hands as the Sieur de Rais himself, and was full partner in the horrible work in the Black Tower.

Gilles snorted, doused his head in a bucket of water, and got himself half sober. Messages from Brittany and Anjou were important. His lands were under both dukes, and he owed them both fealty.

WHEN the Englishman was brought into this lower room of the Black Tower, Gilles stared hard at him and then roared delighted welcome. An obscure member of the Talbot family, this man had once been his prisoner, back in war days; he remembered the fellow very well indeed. A straight, wide-shouldered man with fine, hard features.

"By my soul, it's honest William Talbot! Welcome to Tiffauges."

"Thanks. It's Sir William now—I serve Duke Jean of Brittany." Talbot produced two folded, sealed bits of vellum. "Letters for you."

"Bah! Nobody here can read except Héricourt," said Gilles. "What's in them?"

Talbot smiled. "They merely confirm my word of mouth to you. I suppose you remember when the Maid was burned?" A spasmodic contortion crossed the gaunt face, touched the hell-hot eyes.

"You should remember, better than I, since you were there," snarled the Marshal. "It was you who gave her a crossed stick, when she asked for a cross."

"But you betrayed her into our hands."

"That's a lie!" exploded Gilles in sudden fury, and clapped his hand to his dagger. "A lie, and I'll ram it down your damned gullet! Who says so?"

"She does," said Talbot. "She told me so herself, only last week. She told me how you left her to fight, while you got fresh men. 'My soul to the devil,' you said to her, 'if I'm not back in five minutes!' Then you raised the drawbridge behind her; she was trapped and captured by our troops."

The burning eyes of Gilles dilated, his cheeks became pale as death. A fit of shivering passed through his massive frame. "She and no other could know my very words to her!" he murmured, tacitly confessing his treachery. "You say she told you—*last week?*"

Talbot nodded.

"Listen," he said. "For a hundred years France has been ravaged by war. At first there were great heroes—Chandos, the Black Prince; du Guesclin—but that generation died. We became savages, bloody of heart and hand; the war was an excuse for massacre, treachery, rapine. We were nothing but beasts, and some of us are still.

"To you Frenchmen, the Maid brought redemption. She turned you into heroes, she renewed the days of chivalry. You yourself she made a true and noble knight who revered God and honored women. Then you betrayed her to us and we killed her."

He paused, sighed, and continued. "It did us no good to kill her; we lost France anyhow. Men turned into beasts once more; but her influence remained with me from the day I gave her that cross in the flame and smoke. It made a new man of me, Gilles. And now she's come back."

Gilles de Rais stirred, lifted a hand, swore a staring oath. "You're stark, staring mad! Why, you saw her burned!"

"I can't help it; she's alive," said Talbot stubbornly. "Man, don't you know the story that's been spreading like wildfire—that she's alive, that she's been recognized by people who knew her? She says that some other girl who looked like her was burned in her place. It must be true. Why, her own brothers have acknowledged her!"

"They have?" Gilles was sweating now; his bloodshot eyes were startled.

"Yes, they have. I've seen and talked with her. So has Duke Jean. She's coming here; she'll be here today. She refused any escort; she has one young woman riding with her, the little maid Anne. That's the reason of my errand here, the message from my master, Duke Jean, and from Anjou.

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"You were her bodyguard, you knew her better than most others did. You're a Marshal of France, but you've gone through most of your money. I'm here to offer you a dukedom, new estates, and more power than you've ever known!"

"Me?" Gilles de Rais wet his lips nervously. "Me?"

"France is in turmoil," pursued Talbot, a spark in his eye. "The nobles fighting each other, murder and pillage everywhere, all chivalry forgotten, the king weak and helpless. The Duke of Brittany is old and fears God; Anjou is sickly and fears death. Jeanne has appealed to them, and they've swung in behind her. March swiftly on Paris, join the king, place him firmly in power, regenerate France and make her a united nation! She intends to make Our Lord the ruler once again in France—"

Gilles leaped up, sudden terror in his harsh features, his haunted eyes a-glare. "Stop it, stop it—all this is incredible! The king left her to perish. I betrayed her. You lie to me! If your story is true, she's come back to seek vengeance on us!"

"Gilles, you should know her better," said Talbot, and smiled sadly. "Vengeance! She, the Maid who never killed any man, as she said truly at her trial! Not at all. She seeks regeneration, not conquest. Brittany and Anjou are agreed. She is coming to bring you to them. You'll know, better than anyone else, whether or not she is Jeanne d'Arc. You're still one of the greatest men in France, Gilles. The king gave you the right to place the Lilies of France on your coat of arms. She says that you, more than any of the others, can give her help, and that you need regeneration more than others also. She's coming alone, with Anne, a girl who serves her—"

MADNESS took hold of Gilles de Rais. He cursed Talbot furiously, bellowed for his men-at-arms, and in a foaming fury ordered the Englishman taken out and thrown into a cell.

Behind this madness was a dark and terrible reason, and it lay in the Black Tower. Roger de Briqueville, the Norman noble, shared this frightful secret. He, like Gilles de Rais, had turned to magic and necromancy and the worship of Satan —a blasphemous worship then prevalent in Europe. From blasphemy to abominations and a frenzy of bloodshed was but a step.

Gilles was not crazed, but horribly sane. He was capable of bridging vast gulfs at a leap—from riotous excesses and blasphemous lust, to the noblest chivalry, or vice versa. So with Briqueville and other men, products of a bloody age, endowed with tremendous vitality and physical vigor, fugitives from all belief in God or faith in anything.

Striding out into the courtyard, Gilles found Briqueville drinking like a fish. He caught the Norman knight's arm, marched him out the gate and down to the river under the walls, flung him into the stream, buffeted him, fell upon him bodily, and in a thrashing of foam and fists both men sobered and crawled out.

"Now come up to the tower and talk sense," said the Marshal grimly. "I have news."

While the men roared with laughter, they went to the tower, got into fresh clothes, and with a glance at the westering sun, Gilles laid the whole thing before his companion in arms and crimes. Briqueville listened in silence, uneasy silence.

"I've thrown that fool Talbot into a cell to keep his mouth shut," concluded Gilles. "That addle-witted woman who pretends to be the Maid will be here before long, by all reports. What about it? String her up?"

The Norman started. "Damn it, Gilles! I saw Jeanne d'Arm burned; and I knew at the time it was some other woman in her place. At least, I thought as much."

"Do you know what you're saying?" rasped out Gilles furiously.

"Yes, God help me, I do. I was not sure of it, naturally, but there was some talk that the English had kept her in

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prison and put another girl in her place. What of it? The world's gone all to hell anyway," and Briqueville dropped his head in his hands.

"All right, snap out of it and listen!" exclaimed Gilles de Rais vigorously. "What if she is Jeanne? What if she has some wild, vast scheme to make France over, to make all of us over, to make knights and nobles the sort of men they used to be in the good old days."

The Norman looked up at him with tragic eyes, and mutely gestured toward the Black Tower above them. Then, after a moment, he spoke.

"Too late, Gilles. We're damned."

"Don't be a fool," said Gilles roughly. "There's something to be said for the idea. With Brittany and Anjou heading it, with a Marshal of France behind it, why shouldn't the country emerge from the plight it's in? Put the king in power, put down the nobles, preach Christ near and far! Think of it, man! Think what it would mean to the world!"

Briqueville stared at him in terror. "You can talk of such things—you, who last night worshipped Satan? You, who killed those girls—"

"Never mind all that, you fool!" The deep, haunted eyes were flaming hungrily now. "If I'm in Hell, I'll bow to Satan. If I'm in Heaven, I'll kiss the hand of God. Why not? Plenty more in the same boat. We exist in this country by force, by power, by fear and terror; whoever can take, takes! Give us something better, and I can appreciate that, also. Can't you?"

"Not when I'm sober." Briqueville shuddered in all his massive frame. "I don't want to think, Gilles. Get some wine. I can't bear to think. I want to forget everything. I'm going up to that girl of mine—"

"Go up to her, then, and get her out of the Tower!" said Gilles de Rais, the veins standing out on his forehead. "Clear her out and do it quickly! So help me, when this woman comes, I'll put her and her friend up there—in my room. Until tomorrow, at least. Until I make up my mind about them. And there's one sure way I can find out whether this nonsense is true. Go on, clear out!"

He made a violent gesture.

The Norman stumbled away. With a sneer, Gilles de Rais called his page; this was a dumb youth, half-imbecile, who served him without question.

"Get me the carved oak casket from my bedroom, and the keys. Bring them here."

The boy brought them, here to the big lower room where the meals were served, where men were now arranging tables for the evening meal. Gilles sat in his high seat above the board, and set one of the keys to the casket of carved oak. From the casket he took a cup.

It was a plain little silver cup, a curious shape. The king had given it to Jeanne d'Arc in Rheims, at the time of the coronation; she, who kept nothing for herself, had in turn given it to Gilles. And now he made use of it in his devil worship. All the inside of the cup was black with blood, fresh blood, from the girls who had died last night on the altar of Satan upstairs.

HE STARED at it, then he was aware of a hush. An odd silence had reached in from the courtyard; the men in the lower part of the hall ceased speaking or moving. They stood at gaze. No one had come with any word of an arrival, yet Gilles remembered suddenly that she had always preferred to be her own messenger. He knew she had come, even before he followed the stare of his men and saw her in the doorway. He sat motionless and afraid, his eyes bulging.

He knew her at once; all his scoffing doubts were blown to nothing. A little older, perhaps, but otherwise the same, slim and lissom and clad in simple white, with the fair sweet head held high, and in her wide eyes that singular look of rapt intentness, as of disembodied power. He could feel her presence, he could sense that clean pure aura which seemed to sweep everything earthly away; which

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lifted him and carried him up and up to visionary heights.

He came stumbling to his feet and leaned on the table-edge.

"Greeting, Gilles," she said in the clear voice he so well remembered. It shook him like a strong wind. "I have not heard good reports of you."

She came forward, the little maid following behind her and looking around with wondering gaze; but the Maid looked only at Gilles. He swallowed hard, tried vainly to speak, and set out a chair.

She took it and seated herself, looking at the cup. "I see you have kept the cup I gave you," she said. He hastily shoved it into the casket and clapped on the lid, and sank back in his own chair.

"A new mission has been given me, Gilles," she said. Always abrupt, always brushing aside useless words. "Did the Englishman, Talbot, bring you my message? Since I saw him, I've had news. The Dauphin is coming to Poictou; he'll be here next week. We'll join him, with Brittany and Anjou. We'll go directly to Paris, before anyone expects us, and join the king, and support him. And this time, Gilles, you'll not betray me."

"No," he said hoarsely, for his tongue stuck. "Pardon, pardon!"

She smiled. "I forgave you long ago, Gilles. You shall be my knight again, and ride with me!"

"Where?" he stammered, and again. "Whither?"

"To regeneration, Gilles. Now send this maid, Anne, where she can rest, while I talk with you."

Gilles summoned the dumb page, ordering the girl taken to his own room upstairs, which would be given the visitors; there were two rooms above, and one of them was fast locked.

Jeanne looked at the boy and smiled, and touched his face. "Are you a good Christian, lad?" she asked.

"No, *madame,*" said the boy; and went away in confusion, with the maid Anne. But Gilles de Rais sat stupefied. The dumb lad had spoken!

NOW the sun went westering and sank slowly, and the daylight reddened and died, and dusk came, while Jeanne talked with Gilles de Rais.

She spoke of a great scheme to uphold the king, to enforce the law of men and of God, to make France great and strong for always. Behind her visionary words was a keen and alert brain; she had a definite plan of action, and in a flash the soldier's mind of Gilles perceived its value.

He drank in her vision, also. The rotten, corrupt social order must be swept clean. The peasants must be made free men; right must triumph over might; purity of heart must come to rule France. Food and wine and lights were brought, but she talked on, and Gilles sat ever more deeply enthralled. At last she rose.

"Tomorrow we must start, Gilles; we'll talk in the morning. The Voices tell me you are an evil man, but you can be cleansed; there is forgiveness for everything. Now give me some wine, in that silver cup of mine, and I'll go to rest."

Gilles trembled in his strong fingers as he opened the casket. "The cup must be washed," he mumbled. "Wait."

He took the cup and went out into the courtyard. He saw Sir Roger de Briqueville there, talking with two men in dusty, rusty half-armor who had just ridden in; two strangers, knights by their golden spurs. He turned away from them, and went to Jean de Héricourt, in a corner of the courtyard, and caught hold of him roughly.

"Jean! You damned limb of evil, wash this cup!" he ordered. "Cleanse it, fill it with the best wine, and bring it to the Maid. Quickly!"

The two knights spoke to him, but he strode past unheeding and hastened back to her, his brain whirling. He dropped on one knee before her and kissed her hand.

"Forgive me, Jeanne," he said very humbly. "From the day I betrayed you, Satan has mastered me—"

"Rather," she broke in quietly, "your conscience."

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"More than that," he said hoarsely. As in the old days, her influence was upon him in full strength; youth was in his heart and in his soul, his mind was turned from all the frightful darkness into which he had been plunged. The ecstatic faith, the simple, blind credulity of the Middle Ages, filled his brain.

"Worse, worse! Forgive me all my evil," he said. "I'll ride behind you, as I did once before. Forgive me!"

She looked up and saw Héricourt coming, bearing the little silver cup filled with wine.

"There is nothing to forgive, Gilles," she said. "But I think there is much to fear."

Gilles de Rais took the cup from his lieutenant and gave it to her. She emptied it, and then he ordered lights brought; and he conducted her himself to the little room where the maid Anne lay.

Not a large room. It was at the head of the stairs. A door at one side was locked. That went into the other room, which also had an entrance from the battlements; a room sinister and awful beyond words. Gilles lighted a wax taper which he had plundered from a church, and went down again to where the evening meal was being laid.

He sat in his high seat and looked at Héricourt and Briqueville and the two strange knights, and said nothing; he did not answer when they spoke to him. His thoughts were far away. He looked at the men ranging the lower board, and saw them not. Nor did he taste the food before him. Suddenly he wakened, bent his brows at the Norman, and beckoned. Sir Roger came close to him, and he spoke under his breath.

"That room—that other room—it must be cleansed. Tell Héricourt. As soon as we've eaten. We must do it ourselves."

"Aye," said Briqueville, with a slight shiver. "Meantime, will you not speak to these two knights?"

"Eh? Yes, yes. Give me some wine."

Gilles came to himself, emptied a huge cup of wine that Héricourt shoved at him, and turned to the two knights. They gave him their names; they were just from Paris, and were riding to Nantes on business for the king. The Sieur de Rais did not see how closely Héricourt watched him, nor the satisfaction in his lieutenant's face when the cup was empty and refilled.

HIS rapt ecstasy died out. When one of the two visitors mentioned Jeanne d'Arc, he turned sharply to them. They did not know that she was here; they were riding on again as soon as they had a bite to eat. Briqueville had not told them she was under this roof.

Laughing, they spoke of her. "She's fooled a good many people up north, with her pretensions," said one. "The Maid's two brothers vouched for her, but later withdrew their statement; it seems she had tricked them neatly. This woman is a wandering adventuress who's trading on Jeanne's name to cook up some intrigue of her own. She tried to ensnare the Bastard of Orleans with her witchcraft, but Dunois soon discovered that she was an imposter, and ordered her given fifty lashes. She escaped before it was done."

Gilles stared at them, the veins of his forehead swollen, his eyes distended terribly. Then Héricourt put in a smooth word.

"It's a wonder some such woman hasn't shown up before now! Jeanne looked like any other peasant girl. Any woman who could pick up enough intimate details about her—and lord knows they're easily picked up—could cook up some plausible yarn."

The brain of Gilles de Rais was reeling. No, no! She had recognized that cup at a glance. She had spoken intimately with him, of things known only to him and to the Maid of Orleans. Or had he deceived himself? But there was the page—and suddenly he beckoned to the boy, put a question to him. The boy blinked at him and shook his head, wordless.

"Name of the devil!" ejaculated Gilles. He glared at the two knights. "You gentle-

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men talk glibly about this woman being an imposter—"

"It's well known," put in one, with a laugh. "In fact; her actual name is Jeanne, but not Jeanne d'Arc. This one is a peasant girl named Jeanne des Armoises. I hear that the king is going to send for her and settle the matter in a court of justice. Once on the rack, she'll confess quickly enough."

The two visitors refused to stay the night, but mounted and rode on their way.

Gilles, sitting drinking with his companions, felt a cold touch of sanity from their words. He discussed the matter with the other two, and they shook their heads. Sir Roger had little to say, but Héricourt derided the pretensions of the woman upstairs. He mentioned the Englishman, and Gilles de Rais started.

"Oh—Talbot! I forgot all about that man. Ho, one of you! Let the Englishman out of his cell, give him food and wine, and let him bed down anywhere till morning." One of the officers went out, and Gilles turned to his two friends. His voice dropped. "That affair upstairs—we must attend to it. Clean everything out."

Héricourt gave him a twisted grin. "What? You're not going to turn your back on Satan, are you?"

"Too late for that," put in Briqueville gloomily.

"Listen, Gilles!" Héricourt suddenly leaned forward. "I know how you can settle all doubts about that woman. Do you remember that Jeanne d'Arc was wounded at Orleans?"

"Yes," replied Gilles. "Of course. I was with her. I tied up the wound—I remember she cried out in fear when she saw the blood. It was in her breast—" He checked himself abruptly. "The devil! I see what you mean. The scar, eh? If this woman is really Jeanne, she'll have a scar."

"Precisely," said Héricourt. "We may kill two birds with one stone—get those bodies out and over into the river, and have a look at our visitor at the same time. All the candles are upstairs, so—"

"Take a torch and go up by the battlements to the other room," said Gilles, and rose. "Come along! We'll settle this matter at once."

He did not see that Héricourt and Sir Roger exchanged a look, a grimace, a nod, as they rose to accompany him. He was in a fury of haste and saw nothing. He even forgot to put men on watch below the stairs that wound up to the ramparts.

Bearing a torch, he led the way up, strode along the narrow battlement, and halted at the massive little door opening into the room of horror. From his keys, he selected one and fitted it to the door. The other two men were close behind him as he strode in. The cool night air gave place to a foul atmosphere, heavy with the scent of blood. The room had not been opened since last night.

GILLES held his smoking torch to a number of half-burned candles, then hurled the brand into a fireplace to smoke out. Light flickered upon the room, which was fitted up with the furniture and trappings of looted churches. Suddenly horror struck across the dancing flames—horror, and the corpses of those young girls who had entered the Black Tower, never to be seen again.

Six of them, hanging pendant, swinging horribly as they had died in the rites of Satan, gagged and done to death. Gilles, breathing heavily, took up a candle and started for the door of the room adjoining. Héricourt hastily checked him.

"Wait! That heavy footfall of yours would waken anyone. First let me make sure they're asleep. We can look for the scar without waking either of them."

Gilles nodded. Héricourt went to the door between the two rooms, unbolted it, and peered within. All was dark. He took the candle from Gilles and softly as a cat went into the next room, across to the high-walled, double Breton bed in the corner.

"We must clear all this out." Gilles de Rais looked at the fearful hanging things,

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and his flame-lit eyes swept about the room. "Over the corner of the battlements into the river. Go and find something to weight the bodies, Roger."

Briqueville obediently hastened out. He left the door open. Gilles impatiently moved to close it, then was checked by Héricourt's voice.

"Gilles! Come quickly."

Forgetting the open door, he turned to join his lieutenant, tiptoed after him across the smaller room, and paused beside the bed. Héricourt opened one of the side-panels and held his light.

"Look! I pulled down the covers—"

Gilles de Rais looked. The face of the Maid he could not see, but he could see her body, fair and lovely in the flickering glow. The smooth round breasts, untouched by any scar—he looked, and a deep groan burst from him as he drew back.

"False!" he cried out, forgetting all caution. "False!"

Héricourt seized his arm, quenched the light. A cry came from the other room, a man's cry of horrified comprehension, and the heavy tread of a man.

"It's Briqueville—come on! Out of here," exclaimed Gilles.

It was not Briqueville, however. When Gilles rushed into the other room he saw Talbot standing there frozen. The Englishman turned, saw him, clapped hand to sword.

"God's blood! You unspeakable foul fiend!" came his horrified gasp. "Now I know that the curse you yourself pronounced when you betrayed the Maid has come true! 'My soul to the devil!' said you, and—"

With one wrenching, agonized cry, Gilles de Rais caught up a sword that lay across the altar of Satan, flung himself at Talbot. The blades clashed. Oaths and curses came in a roar from the foaming lips of Gilles. Héricourt, drawing his own sword, waited at one side.

They fought with a kind of madness then. There was little science to their swordplay and yet in those next moments miraculously neither man was wounded. Their blades flashed without ceasing—until the strange interruption struck them powerless.

A terrible shriek burst from the doorway. Jeanne was standing there, the maid Anne behind her—standing in full sight of those six hanging things that dangled and swung in the candlelight.

"Accursed!" rang out her cry, in a voice that pierced the three men and froze them where they stood. "Accursed! The cup was accursed, and whoever drinks from it is likewise accursed—betrayed, betrayed! Gilles, you have betrayed me again—"

Another wild scream and she was gone, and the little maid with her. Barely in time, Gilles de Rais wakened, as Talbot's blade sheared at him. He parried the blow. Héricourt leaped in from behind, deadly and swift as the stroke of a reptile, and ran the Englishman through the body.

Talbot went to his knees, then doubled back in agony and came half upright.

"Recreant!" he cried. "Accursed traitor to God and man—accursed—"

He flung his sword hilt first, and died. The hilt cast the shadow of a cross upon the face of Gilles de Rais; struck him between the eyes, and felled him senseless.

Gilles de Rais, Marshal of France, opened his eyes to sunlight. It was morning; he lay on a heap of straw in the courtyard. His men were moving about. Briqueville was at his side, holding a cup of wine to his lips. He drank, and blinked up.

For a moment he remained befogged with sleep; and then the memory of the night before must have come to him in a sudden flash, for his body stiffened and his hand came up to grasp Briqueville's arm.

"Where—where is she?"

His voice was hoarse.

"Gone," said the Norman. "She fled, and the maid with her. They took horses and went. The men dared not stop them—they said she was like a madwoman, screaming terrible things. Here's Jean now."

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Héricourt came up to them, and smiled at the savage glare of Gilles.

"Hello! Feeling better now?" he exclaimed lightly. "Everything's cleared out of the way, Gilles. The Englishman's gone with the others."

Gilles de Rais put out hand to his belt, under the straw, and with the other beckoned Héricourt. His face was terrible to see.

"Come here, stoop down," he said. "I've just thought of something."

Laughing, Héricourt stooped above him. "Yes? What is it?"

"When we looked at her—last night—which one was it?" demanded Gilles.

"Bah! What matter now? She's gone, and good riddance—"

Gilles clutched the man's arm and held him down. "Clever, aren't you?" he croaked hoarsely. "I see it all. You inspired those two knights to tell all that nonsense. You had me look at her; you hid her face. It was the little maid I saw, not Jeanne! Well, here's payment."

Héricourt cried out as the iron fingers sank into his arm. He cried out again as the dagger of Gilles de Rais plunged into him, and that was his last cry on earth.

"Accursed!" Gilles heaved himself up from the straw, with a face like death. "Accursed! She said it—horses, there! To horse, quickly! Out and find her! A thousand écus to the man who brings her back unharmed—"

But she was never found, and the scene faded away, and the lights died.

•

THE wall before us was blank. I drew a sharp breath and glanced around. The two of us were alone in the lecture hall of Halfway House. I glanced at Ibrahim bin Mert, and spoke.

"How much of this—this picture—was real?"

He shrugged, his dark features thoughtful and uneasy. "I don't know. Gilles de Rais was afterward hanged and burned for his deviltry, for sacrificing children to Satan. But Bluebeard and the nursery rhyme! You see how it got about, about the women hanging in his closet, the wives? That poor crazed imposter who called herself Jeanne d'Arc must have blabbed about it until it became a countryside legend."

"Never mind about all that," I said. "Was that woman really Jeanne d'Arc—or was she not?"

He gave me a queer look, and came to his feet.

"History says not, anyhow. Let's go."

We started out. Then, at the head of the stairs, we stopped. Something was there that certainly had not been there when we came in.

It was a pedestal on which stood a glass bell. Beneath the glass, lighted cunningly by unseen lights that revealed every inch and line of it, stood a silver cup. An old cup, battered and worn, bent, broken at the edges, but very lovely and graceful even yet. Under it was a card, on which was printed:

THE CUP FROM THE OAKEN CASKET OF GILLES DE RAIS

I stared at it, then at my companion.

"Look here—can this be the same one? Is it real? Is it genuine?"

He stared at the cup. On the foot of it were the maker's hallmarks, plain to see and still legible, for anyone who knew about such things. As he regarded them, I saw his lips moving; he was evidently reading them, translating them. Suddenly I saw beads of sweat start out on his forehead.

"What about it?" I asked. "Do you think it's genuine? What do you think?"

He shook his head.

"I—I don't know." He glanced around swiftly, as though in startled fear. "I can only say, with Sir Roger de Briqueville, that I don't want to think about it at all. Let's get out of here! I tell you, I don't like this place—"

I agreed with him.

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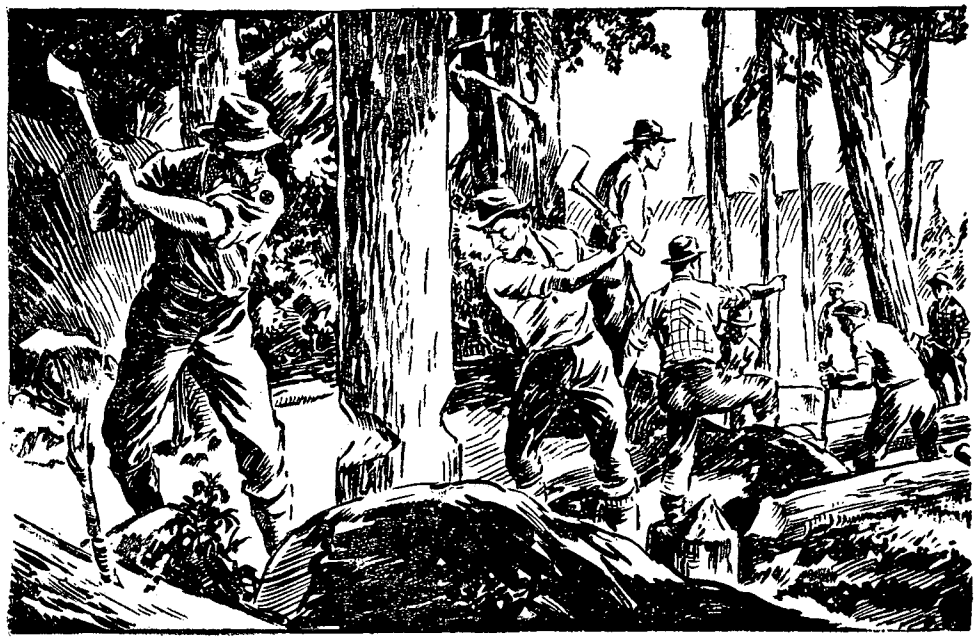

River Pig

By ROBERT E. PINKERTON

Author of "Boiling River," "Pirates of Foggy Reef," etc.

Riley Greer stuck to the code of the tall timber . . . until a woman made his loyalties look like a lightning-blasted pine. A novelet of the old Wisconsin woods . . .

I

RILEY GREER glared at his employer. "Maybe it was your feet that got froze off that winter, but the other end of you musta been frost bit too," Riley said. "You ain't got good logging sense any more."

"Only mistake I ever made was taking on a fresh kid for walking boss," Dave Morton retorted.

They went at it hot and heavy then. Though it was subordinate against owner, no holds were barred. And nothing in word or attitude indicated that Riley Greer had one idol in life, Dave Morton, nor did Dave betray a deep affection for the younger man.

"If you buy Fawn Creek timber, you won't saw a stick of it next year," Riley said.

"A real logger can get it out."

"Sure. I can bank logs on the Gulf of Mexico if I've got enough horses to haul 'em that far. But with you running wild here in the office, I've got to get the cut in cheap to keep the sheriff off your neck."

"I'll take care of the sheriff," Dave growled. "Get up to Fawn Creek. Figure dams and lay out logging roads."

"Buy that Fawn Creek timber and you get another walking boss," Riley threatened.

" 'Fraid of it, eh?"

"Only afraid of being taken for a fool."

"I bought it last month," Dave said.

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Number One camp began to lay down timber when Riley took over

"What!" Riley roared as he jumped to his feet. "Never asked me if—"

"I don't have to ask anybody how to run my business."

"Then try running it once!" Riley yelled, and he turned to the bookkeeper on his high stool across the room. "Make out my time, Ned. And write 'Goodbye' across it."

"And 'Good riddance,'" Dave Morton bellowed. "If I had even one foot, I'd throw you out."

"And if you had two feet, I'd knock you through the window."

RILEY GREER went out on Main Street, and to him the white sunlight was red. He did not see the storekeepers scowling as his calks chewed their new plank sidewalk. He did not know women's eyes lighted as he passed. None missed the tall heavy figure, rugged fighter's face and tawny curls that kept crowding from beneath a cocky little riverman's hat.

He did not see a spidery red Concord buggy beside the walk or a slender, dark haired, black-eyed girl maneuvering her long and voluminous petticoats and silk dress between the wheels while she climbed to the seat.

Riley Greer had just passed as she took up the reins and nodded her thanks to the clerk who held the nervous gray horse. Then women screamed. Riley whirled to see the gray rearing and striking.

The girl sat erectly in the seat, driving posture perfect, gloved hands holding the reins firmly, whip at just the right angle.

"Barney," she said sharply, and flicked the horse.

The gray lunged violently, jerking the light buggy as if it were a market basket. He reared again.

But as he went up, Riley Greer was leaping for the bit. Riley caught it with one hand, was swung in front of the pawing hoofs. Then weight had its effect. Barney came down, and two strong arms held his head motionless.

"Step aside, please," the girl commanded. "I'll handle him."

Riley hung on. "You're crazy," he blurted. "This horse will kick that baby carriage into the middle of August."

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"Step aside!" the girl repeated.

Riley saw the black eyes flash, and thought how much more beautiful she became in mounting rage.

"Besides," she added, "I can't learn anything from a river pig about handling a horse."

"What's the matter with this town?" Riley demanded. "Nobody thinks I know anything today."

"Perhaps you don't."

"I'm only sorry there ain't a mud puddle for that nag to dump you into," he said.

Riley released the horse's head and leaped back to the sidewalk. There he strode away, and when women screamed and hoofs clattered and men started running, Riley did not even turn his head.

But when he had gone half a block the hoofs made a new sound and screams and shouts ceased. The gray had bolted.

Riley saw him coming. The girl was tugging at the reins and accomplishing nothing. The bit was clenched between the gray's teeth.

The riverman started to run, angling out into the street, sprinting when the horse was past, leaping desperately for a hand hold on the back of the seat.

The horse was really running now. Riley's calked shoes were leaving marks fifteen feet apart. He got his other hand on the back. A terrific bounce helped lift a foot to the axle beside a spinning rear wheel. From there to a place in the seat was easy.

RILEY reached out and took reins and whip. He did not see the frightened look in the girl's face. He was too busy looking ahead. Main Street was a blind. It ended at the high bank over the river.

His calked shoes braced against the shiny patent leather dash, Riley began to pull. The gray's pace was scarcely slackened. The precipice was a block away. Riley struck with the whip, a long slashing cut.

Startled, the horse released his grip on the bit. Two strong arms began sawing on the flesh of the mouth, pulling his head up, throwing him off balance.

"Be ready to jump if he don't stop."

The girl did not move. "I think you have him now," she said.

Riley slowed the horse to a walk, turned him. "Not bad for a river pig," he said.

"You didn't teach me anything. You merely had more strength."

"Huh! If you knew horses, you'd never 'a' let him get hold of that bit."

"I wasn't expecting—" she began stiffly.

"Got to expect devilment with a horse like this," Riley snorted. "And as for river pigs—watch!"

He touched the gray with the whip, spoke to him. Barney started swiftly, trotting, throwing his feet high. His ears twitched, his head jerked. But a stern voice spoke behind him and the reins were two bands of steel. The gray settled down to business, raced back through Main Street.

People lined the sidewalks. Hats were waved. The girl looked straight ahead.

"Easy, boy," Riley said. "Steady now. Whoa, boy. That's it. You've got manners if you're made to use 'em."

The horse dropped to a slow trot, to a walk. He walked steadily, without nervous jerks of his head.

"You needn't rub it in," the girl exclaimed.

"Who started this?" Riley demanded. "I'm a river pig, all right, but I know horses. And I know something about humans. Time for you to start driving again is now. Take 'em."

He handed her the reins and the whip.

"Why?" she asked.

"Keep your nerve up. Drive outa town a mile or two. Good clip. You'll forget what happened. And maybe he will."

"You think I'm afraid?"

"Girl, ain't you? And you're most afraid you've lost the upper hand with him. Only way to prove who's boss is to be boss. Go to it."

They drove out of town, raced two miles along a country road. The girl drove well. She had little mannerisms, matters of form that meant nothing to Riley Greer. But her slim hands were steady and strong. Her nervousness quickly vanished.

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"That's the way to lick 'em," Riley exclaimed. "Beat 'em to it. Show 'em who's boss."

Back in town on Main Street, the gray shied at a piece of paper, threatened to bolt.

"Take him," the girl said.

"Scared again?" Riley taunted.

"I'm tired."

"That's no excuse. He'll know it and never forget it. Man or horse, don't let 'em know you even think of quitting."

"I'm not quitting!" she exclaimed angrily.

"Same thing. Drive this horse home. Right to the barn. Don't let him get any funny ideas or you'll never lick him."

THE girl turned onto a side street. She had a little difficulty but kept control over Barney. Suddenly she wheeled into the driveway of the biggest home in Pine Falls. The house was a mass of scroll work. The lawn was filled with iron dogs and deer. Several people were on the broad, high verandah.

A stableman took the gray. Riley started back to the street, his calks clinking on the gravel of the drive.

"Wait," the girl cried. "My father will want to thank you. And I do. I imagine you saved my life."

"Maybe," Riley said indifferently, and he went on.

But a man called. He came across the lawn, heavy, gray-haired, walking with a powerful, confident stride.

"Hey!" he bellowed. "Come have a drink. Heard what you did. Guess Celia knows now it takes a lumberjack to do things."

"Hello, Zach," Riley said, and he glanced at the house. "You've come a long way from the deep woods."

"Yeah, but women run this camp and they've got queer ideas about grub and bunks," Zach Hughes said. "We'll have a drink and—how about a job?"

"Doin' what?"

"I've got a lot of camps. Always needing men. And there's boards to be shoved in the mill."

"And lots of jacks to shove 'em."

"But I was thinking—something extra on the time check," Zach Hughes said. "I've got only one daughter and you didn't let her neck get broke."

"Next time you're on River Street you can buy me a drink," Riley said, and started away.

Celia Hughes flushed. She was not sure what he meant. But her father was the biggest lumberman in town, and he had won through by achieving ruthlessly all along the way.

"Wait," Zach commanded. "What's your name?"

"Riley Greer."

"What! You Greer? Now you got to come and have a drink with me. In the parlor. Why, this lad," and he turned to Celia, "is walking boss for Dave Morton."

"Was," Riley said.

"What you mean?"

"I've quit."

Zach Hughes looked at Riley, and Riley understood something of what had won the man's success.

"I've got a lot of timber up Deer River," Zach said. "Putting in four camps this fall. You're the man I want to run 'em."

"How far up the river?" Riley demanded.

"Below Farm Creek fork."

"And how you mean, run these camps? Take orders from you and peddle 'em to the foremen? Will you be coming up in your buggy and telling me how to drive the Deer?"

"Who's doing the hiring here?" Zach Hughes snorted.

"If I'm doing a job, I'm doing it," Riley answered.

Zach stared. "All I want from you is logs in the mill boom."

"You've got a walking boss," Riley said.

II

MRS. ZACH HUGHES, as mistress of the largest house and wife of the wealthiest lumberman in Pine Falls, had definite ideas of her position in the com-

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munity and her obligations. The day after her daughter's rescue she wrote Riley Greer a letter of thanks and concluded with a cordial invitation to dine three nights later.

"Want him cutting up your oak floors with his corks?" Zach demanded.

"He must have other shoes," Mrs. Hughes said.

"You're only making him feel foolish," her husband insisted. "A man that's ate in logging camps all his life will be scared stiff of the outfit you load on a table."

"It will be a simple family meal. And giving him a job is not sufficient, after what he did for Celia."

"Give him a job!" Zach snorted. "He took it. Didn't he, Celia?"

"He doesn't hide his opinions," the girl admitted.

"Which is one reason he's the best river boss in this part of Wisconsin. Since Dave Morton got his feet froze four years ago, Greer's run the outfit for him. Wonder how he happened to quit. He's worked for Dave ever since he was a kid."

"Perhaps it is his habit of speaking his mind," Celia said. "I don't think he will come."

Riley Greer had no intention of accepting the invitation. His interest was in logs, in the hard tough business of harvesting the white pine of northern Wisconsin in days when only hard men survived. His attention was centered on the new job, for he had a busy summer ahead of him.

And he was not happy. He was irritable, ready to pick a fight with Zach Hughes' office staff, even with Zach himself. Often Riley's thoughts wandered to Dave Morton. He had never worked for anyone except Dave. He had always believed that Dave was the finest riverman and the best woods boss in the state. Now, as he studied maps and cruisers' reports, he found himself using Dave's methods, thinking as Dave had taught him to think.

Two days after their last interview, Riley Greer met Dave Morton hobbling along Main Street with crutch and cane.

"Hello, hero," Dave greeted with a grin. "Heard you hauled in a good job when you thought you was only sawin' at that gray's mouth."

Riley scowled. "What you buy that Fawn Creek timber for?" he demanded.

"Make money."

"You'll even lose your crutch."

"Listen, boy," Dave said. "A man works to win and to make money. It's like liquor. You got to keep adding to get a kick. At first, just winning is enough. Then you got to knock over a bigger job. Everybody said that Fawn Creek timber couldn't be gotten out. So I'm taking a whirl at it."

"You can't drive that trickle," Riley protested. "If you was to spill a box of matches at the head, not a one would get down to Deer River."

"I could run two drives."

"And eat up the profits."

"Not at the price I paid for the timber. I been waiting seven years 'till the owners saw sense. And before I got drunk that cold night and lost half of each foot, I figured out dams and rollways and the whole drive. I'll make more money on that Fawn Creek timber than on any I ever bought."

"Who's going to run the camp for you?" Riley asked.

"Me," Dave Morton said. "I can't ride a log but I can sit in a buggy. I'm going up next week to build dams and lay out logging roads. And next spring I'll have the biggest profit I ever made on a saw log."

DAVE went clumping down the street, and Riley Greer, feeling wholly miserable, watched him go. He was still staring when a horse and buggy stopped beside him.

"Could you give me another driving lesson?" a bright voice asked.

Celia sat in the red Concord. Barney pranced nervously but was under control.

"You do all right," Riley said.

"Why are you so disagreeable? I'm sorry about that other time. And I would like to have you go with me while I take some of the ginger out of Barney."

Riley looked at her. He had known she

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was beautiful when he first saw her but he had dismissed her from his mind.

"Thought you didn't like to ride with a river pig," he said.

"But you're not one."

"Nothing else. Same as your dad was, and Dave Morton and everybody in this town that amounts to anything."

"I never saw anyone who so loves to fight," she laughed. "I've apologized. Let's start over again."

They drove out into the country. Riley found a different girl beside him. Celia was gay. She had a sweetness he had not suspected. She had a quality that dispelled his irritation.

"You can laugh," she exclaimed.

"Sure, when I'm not worried," Riley said.

"Quitting Dave Morton is what worries you now."

"How'd you know that?"

"It was near his office that I first saw you. You started barking at me."

"I'm sorry," Riley said. "I was touchy that day."

"And I didn't help things. You are devoted to Dave Morton, aren't you?"

"He's the finest logger that ever pulled on a corked shoe. Best friend I ever had."

His tone was challenging, and Celia glanced at him to find pain in his eyes.

"You're a strange person," she said. "Have to fight with those you love best."

Riley went to dinner in the Hughes home. He did not wear calked shoes. He had a dark new suit and boiled shirt and his deportment was better than that of Zach himself, as Zach's wife was quick to point out after Riley had gone.

"Sure," Zach agreed. "Riley's a smart lad. He'll be logging for himself before long."

"It will not be necessary to have him again," Mrs. Hughes said.

"Why not?" Celia asked.

Mrs. Hughes looked at her daughter. "Why?" she countered.

"I like Riley Greer."

"I hope, my dear, you are not getting foolish ideas."

"Not foolish ones," Celia said.

Mrs. Hughes left the room. Zach watched his daughter.

"The lad's a good logger," he said. "He'll get some place now he's cut loose from Morton."

"I don't care what sort of logger he is," Celia said. "He is the most honest person I ever saw."

Zach Hughes' glance shifted. "How you mean, honey? Lots of men won't lie or steal."

"Riley would, if it was necessary to keep honest."

"You got queer ideas in that school you been goin' to."

Celia and Riley went driving two or three times, and then Riley left Pine Falls for the deep woods. He had much work to do, laying out logging roads, blazing a tote road, selecting sites for four camps, deciding where he would bank the cut. There was even a possibility he would have to put in another dam on Deer River. Zach Hughes planned to log his holdings in a hurry and much water would be needed for the spring drives.

Riley liked the work. Each decision reached was not alone an expression of skill and knowledge, of that natural instinct a good logger must have. It meant loss or gain for his employer, a saving in time and wages, certainty of getting logs to the mill.

SIX weeks were spent on the job. The timber was fifty miles from Pine Falls and Riley could not spare the time to get to town. When he did arrive, Celia Hughes and her mother were in Minneapolis.

"Getting a lot a clothes," Zach grumbled. "Talkin' of going to Europe. Women are queer."

Riley did not comment. He was busy making out lists of supplies needed for building the dam and preliminary work. When he was ready he went to Zach Hughes.

"There's long hauls on some of that," he said.

"Leave 'em for a year or two," Zach snapped.

"And with a light snowfall, you won't

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have much water for drivin' Deer River."

"You made some bluffs about how good you are," Zach snorted. "Get those logs down here and get 'em cheap."

"You been up there?" Riley countered.

"No, but I've got good cruisers and I pretty near know."

"The cruise is good. I checked it several places. The report on loggin' roads and the river was made by a man who ain't been near a saw log in a long time. You've got a good proposition there, but it ain't so good as you thought. And with Dave Morton driving Fawn Creek into the Deer, there'll be trouble aplenty."

"You see Dave up there?" Zach demanded.

"We laid out the tote road together and divided the work."

"I'm not helping any cheap logger by cutting roads for him!" Zach Hughes roared. "I thought you'd do something like that. You're working for me now."

He had a lot more to say, and it was profane and definite. Riley returned the angry glare and remained unmoved.

"All right," he said. "I saved you some money. Now I'll spend it. I'll cut the road. Dave will lay back till I've finished and then use it."

"If he hauls a pound over it—"

"What's to prevent him?" Riley cut in. "Road will be on government land except across one section Dave owns. And I thought you was a smart logger."

Zach had never had an employee talk like that to him, but before he could explode, a boy entered with a telegram. The lumberman glanced at it and all anger vanished. He stared at Riley without seeing him.

"Do I cut the road or not?" Riley demanded.

"I'm going to the bank," Zach muttered to his bookkeeper. "Finish that statement and bring it over."

He hurried to the door without his hat.

"Could you build a steam engine?" the bookkeeper asked Riley.

"I wouldn't even try."

"Zach can. He can even fool them grain pit boys down in Minneapolis."

Riley puzzled over that a moment, but his mind was full of other things and he went down to the warehouse to check his lists. He did not see Zach Hughes for two days. Then he asked:

"Do I cut that road or not?"

Zach stared without comprehension for a moment.

"Get the logs down," he growled.

"It's got to be that way," Riley said.

He went into the woods with forty men and did not return for a month. Nor did he report on what he was doing. When he came out he found Zach Hughes' face was haggard. The man had an absent look in his eyes. He merely nodded when Riley told all that had been accomplished and what he intended to do next.

Riley went out to find the red Concord drawn up before the office. Celia Hughes held the reins over Barney. She was smiling, and Riley had never seen her smile like that.

He stared. Something was crowding into his throat. His chest had a stuffed feeling. He was unaware that he had taken his hat from the tawny curls and was holding it in his hands.

Celia cramped the wheels for him to enter. They did not speak but stared straight ahead as she drove out of town. After two miles, Barney's fast trot slowed. Soon he was walking. The reins slackened. Both turned.

"I didn't know it happened like this," Riley said.

"Why shouldn't it?"

"Thought there had to be a lot of talk. Some stepping around like a fellow starting a fight."

He looked at the face so close to his. Riley stared for a long time.

"Now there don't seem to be anything that needs to be said," he whispered.

"You—I knew it would be like this," Celia said.

III

THREE days later Celia told Riley Greer that she was not leaving for Europe.

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"Go ahead," he said. "I've got a tough winter. You may not get another chance."

"It isn't that," she answered. "Dad said he didn't have the money."

"Then I'm a million dollars in debt," Riley chuckled.

"He means it. He is terribly worried. I've heard he's been buying wheat."

Riley did not comment. He remembered what the bookkeeper had said but he was a logger, intent on getting logs to the mill, and the grain market was outside his world.

"I told him I will marry you," Celia said.

"That was my job," Riley protested.

"It was necessary. Mother wanted to take me to Minneapolis for the winter."

"Did Zach blow up?"

"Mother did. Dad just looked at me with a strange expression as if he were asking a question."

"I don't ask questions when I look at you," Riley said. "You could have only one answer and I already know it."

Celia smiled. "It's nice to know we feel the same about each other," she said.

Riley was ready to go back to Deer River. One hundred men had been hired. Zach Hughes took him aside.

"I've heard about your Camp One when you worked for Dave Morton," Zach said. "Turned in some tallies nobody believed."

"The tallies were right," Riley said. "Never a camp of sixty men banked so many logs."

"Heard they stuck with you season after season."

"Four years now."

"And they're all young, like you."

Riley nodded. He was proud of that crew.

"It was you, not Morton, they stuck with," Zach said. "Now if you was to let the word get out that they could move into a camp on Deer River, I'd be willing to up their pay couple of dollars a month."

"No," Riley said instantly.

"What's the matter with you?" Zach demanded. "Who you working for?"

"You," Riley said.

"Begin to show it."

"I'm doing the job. Better'n you know. But I ain't stealing a crew from another logger. I can build up my own crews."

"That takes time. I need a big cut this winter."

"And I ain't paying one crew more than the others," Riley continued. "It's a fool idea. How much work would I get out of the other three when that word got passed around?"

"Listen, you young fool!" Zach exploded. "Just starting a job, figuring that because maybe you're going to—"

He broke off. His rage fled before a speculative look in his eyes. Suddenly he gripped Riley's shoulder.

"Go ahead and get out the logs, lad," he said. "But get 'em out. I got to have 'em. Some lads in the wheat pit in Minneapolis think they've got my drive hung. I'll show 'em. Can't let anything happen to Celia and the missus."

"You been trying to harvest grain with a crosscut saw?"

"Yeah, but I'll get that grain into the mill boom yet."

"Then let me run the woods end."

"That's the way to look at it," Zach Hughes agreed. "You ought to, being almost in the family now."

RILEY went back to the woods. The tote road was open and a new dam on the Deer had been built, but camps were to be erected and logging roads cut.

It was a big job, with operations spread through many miles of forest. Also, because he knew Zach Hughes might be pinched for money, that the greatest profit possible must be made on the logs, Riley changed his plans considerably so as to get the shortest hauls.

He had no time to go to town. Celia's letters arrived by nearly every tote team. Riley could not match them in volume or number. Often after supper he was traveling from one camp to another. On Sundays he was busy with his four foremen laying out the work.

"I'll drive down some Saturday soon's logging starts," he wrote.

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But he did not go. Riley had worked only for Dave Morton and was accustomed to loyal crews of picked lumberjacks, to a force and zest in the work. Dave's equipment had been of the best. He fed his men well. And the Camp One crew, youthful personal followers of Riley himself, had worked without a foreman.

The wage scale in Zach Hughes' camps, Riley discovered, had been pared. The cut was not much, but it irritated the men and robbed them of the logger's normal zeal. Some of the horses were old and sick half the time. Skidding teamsters blamed their animals for low tallies. They complained of oats and hay, and when Riley investigated he found they were right.

The men's fare was not up to standard and nothing so disgruntles a logger. Riley began writing complaints to the office, and when there were no replies he wrote directly to Zach. Still there was no answer. Men asked for their time. Each camp was running short handed.

Just before Christmas, Riley hitched up his light driving team and drove down to Pine Falls.

"What kind of a haywire outfit you running?" he demanded of Zach Hughes when he reached the office.

"I told you I wanted those logs cheap," was the retort.

"The cut will be five million short of what you figure."

"And you're the lad who bragged about how he'd get 'em out," Zach sneered.

He did not look like the same man Riley had known in early summer. His face was drawn. A mixture of savagery and furtiveness was in his glance.

"By spring you'll have nothing but the scum of the woods in your camps," Riley said. "You'll have to buy more horses. It's going to be a tough winter, the way the snow's been falling."

"You wanted to be let alone," Zach taunted. "Now you coming whimpering before Christmas."

"I didn't count on your knifing me from behind. This wheat business has ruined you."

All the fight went out of Zach. "Come on up to the house for supper tonight," he said. "The missus has gone to Minneapolis."

"Is Celia there?" Riley asked.

"Yes."

"I'll be up."

RILEY arrived early. He had an hour with Celia before Zach came home, and for a time he forgot his troubles.

"I think of enough nice things to write you," Riley said. "Seems like that's all I do think about. But I never get any time."

"Isn't the work going well?"

"No."

"Dad's been worried," Celia said. "It's like living with a bear. What is it?"

"Wheat."

"But how does that affect the camps?" she asked.

"Zach's cutting corners too fine," Riley said. "Hasn't got the money or needs it in Minneapolis. I can't get out logs with the set-up he's given me."

"What will it mean?"

Riley shrugged. "I don't know how he stands or how much he's lost. But if things keep on going wrong in the woods, he'll finish his logging in the hole instead of having fifty thousand dollars profit."

Celia looked at Riley with wide eyes.

"The Hughes family may lose everything it owns?" she demanded.

"I can see how it might happen."

Zach came home then. He had been drinking. He drank more before dinner. His manner was uneasy but he made an effort to be jovial and he did not mention business. After they had eaten he arranged for Celia and Riley to sit together on a sofa.

"You don't get much chance," he said with a wink. "And I won't bother you long."

Zach gave Riley a cigar and lighted his own.

"I'm in a bad jam," he began suddenly. "Glad the missus ain't here 'cause I want to talk to you two alone. When you figure on getting married?"

"After Riley gets the logs in the boom," Celia answered.

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"What you waiting for?"

"I'm not marrying a man I never see."

"Huh! Riley'll be able to get out often now, and with your mother gone we might—"

"Celia knows how she wants it," Riley said.

"All right," Zach conceded. "I could give you a real wedding now. Later—I'm liable to be broke."

"Is it as bad as that, Dad?" Celia cried.

Zach nodded. "It's going to be tough on you and on your mother," he said. "You've got used to a lot of things you'll have to do without. Unless—"

He stared at them, and mostly at Celia.

"There's one chance to pull out," he began. "Riley can do it for me, and for you."

"Let me fix wages and buy supplies and I'll pull you through on that Deer River job," Riley said.

"It's more than that. Here's how things stand. Even my Deer River timber is mortgaged. Wheat cleaned me out. I'll admit it now. But before things went bad I loaned some money. On timber. If I can foreclose on that I'll have valuable property. Get it dirt cheap. With that in my hands, I can save the mill and work myself clear."

Celia did not understand but Riley went to the point.

"How can I foreclose a mortgage for you?" he asked.

Zach ignored that question. "Loaning that money is what started the squeeze," he said savagely. "A month later it would have saved me half a million. Now I'm going to get the loan back and a lot more. Riley can do it. He can save this house for you, Celia. He can save you from wearing cotton dresses, save your horse and buggy. He can give you that trip to Europe. Maybe he can even go with you. He can do all that for you, Celia. And without much trouble."

"How?" Riley cut in.

Zach Hughes looked at him through thick smoke.

"I loaned that money to Dave Morton when he bought the Fawn Creek holding," Zach said. "I got to get my hands on that timber or I'm done for."

IV

RILEY GREER did not speak or move nor did his gaze shift from Zach Hughes' face.

"You can do it, boy," Zach rushed on. "First, there's that old Camp One crew of yours. Just send 'em the word. Fix their wages any way you want. That'll put a crimp in Dave this winter and slow up his drive, won't it?"

"Probably wreck his drive," Riley agreed.

"Sure!" Zach beamed. "And his drive's got to be wrecked. Dave ain't to get a log down. Then he can't meet his notes and I'll get all that timber for practically nothing. I can borrow enough on it to pull clear. By fall I'll be jake. Celia can keep her horse and buggy and get new silk dresses. She can go to Europe. And the minute that timber's mine, I give you a share in my business."

Riley sat staring at Hughes. Celia felt the tension and turned to look at him.

"What other schemes have you got to wreck Dave?" Riley asked.

"If his cut falls off, if he ain't banking logs, the wholesalers will shut down on his credit," Zach answered. "He can't get in camp supplies and he'd have to quit before the drive. It's the way I'd like to work it."

Riley did not speak and Zach went on with his scheme.

"Get that crack crew away from him. Start cutting timber along his tote road when weather's bad. Block the road so he'll run shy of grub. Start stories in his camps that he's liable to go broke and the crew won't get paid. Blow up those new dams he's put in. Dave can't drive a log in Fawn Creek without 'em. And even if he does stick through to the drive, dump your upper rollways into Deer River and block him. You're smart, boy. You can figure out a lot of ways to keep Dave Morton from sawing a log this year."

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Riley Greer arose. He did not look at Celia. His rugged face was stiff but Zach did not see that.

"It won't be hard," Zach said. "Dave's never been well since he lost his feet. Running those camps this winter has worn him down. He's been to see a doctor twice this month."

Riley started. He looked at Celia for the first time, but she knew he did not see her. Suddenly he walked to the door.

"I'm getting my time," he said.

He went out. Celia heard him stop for his hat in the hall. Zach was staring in bewilderment.

"What's he talking about?" Zach demanded. "Bring him back here."

Celia ran to the door. Riley was going down the steps.

"You're deserting a sinking ship!" she cried.

"A pirate ship," he retorted.

"But don't you see dad is desperate? He isn't himself."

"I wouldn't be myself if I did that."

"But there must be some way—"

"What?" Riley asked. "Stand still and see him cut Dave Morton's throat?"

"You think more of Dave Morton than of me," Celia cried.

"It isn't that, and I'm not thinking about you in this at all," Riley said. "I can take care of you. I'll marry you tomorrow. But I'm not going to buy you."

"What do you mean, buy me?"

"You heard Zach. You and a share in the business if I ruin the best friend I ever had."

"You are being very hard," Celia said. "I liked that in you. But I never dreamed you would turn your hardness against me."

"I DON'T figure I am." Riley answered quietly. "Zach can work free of this if he gets down to business and quits being a hog. He can get out his Deer River cut and make good money. Dave will pay those notes. But Zach wants an easy way and big stakes, with me doing the dirty work for him."

"Now you're going back to Dave Morton and fight dad?"

"I'm going back to Dave. The fighting depends on what Zach does."

"Will you do one thing for me?" Celia asked.

"Anything I can."

"Don't tell Dave Morton what dad has said. Dad believed he could trust you. Later he'll be ashamed."

"I won't tell Dave," Riley promised. "But I won't forget what Zach is planning."

"You're hard and you're cold!" Celia cried. "You're brutal. You won't bend an inch for me."

"I'll marry you tomorrow and think I'm the luckiest man alive," Riley said. "But I won't knife Dave Morton to do it."

Celia ran back into the house. The door closed and Riley went on down the steps.

The next night he walked into the office of Dave Morton's Camp One, sixty miles from Pine Falls. It was a small log building with room only for three bunks, a stove, desk and the wanigan.

Dave Morton lay in one of the lower bunks. He started when he saw his visitor, and a grin spread.

Riley Greer looked at him. Dave's face was haggard. He was covered with a blanket and a hand that lay outside was big boned but wasted.

George Perkins, the foreman, and the timekeeper greeted Riley boisterously. Riley stared at them.

"The cook wants a three-handed game of smear," he said.

Their faces sobered. They went out.

"Go to town tomorrow," Riley said to Dave Morton. "You got no business here."

"The docs can't do anything for me," Dave answered.

"Stumping around these camps is doing plenty."

"Somebody's got to run 'em."

Riley looked steadily at his old friend.

"I went out on a limb with these holdings," Dave continued. "I've got to bank logs and I've got to drive 'em to the mill. Can't be any slip."

"Go to town tomorrow," Riley repeated. "I'll run your camps and take your drive to the mill."

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Dave Morton's face softened. His body relaxed beneath the blanket. "I'll go in the morning," he said.

"Tell me your lay-out."

For fifteen minutes Dave explained the penciled lines on a blueprint map and checked cruisers' reports and tallies.

"What I don't know now, I'll soon find out," Riley said. "I'm going over to the sleeping camps and see the boys."

"They'll tally logs now," Dave grinned.

Riley stopped at the door. "Before you see the doc, buy a couple of rifles and some shells and send 'em back by the first tote team," he said.

Dave lifted himself on one elbow and stared. But he did not speak.

"And Lute Mace is in town on his yearly drunk," Riley continued. "Soon's he's sober, send him up. I want him to hunt deer."

Dave stared searchingly.

"Anything else?" he asked.

"Get some meat on your bones. Maybe you can if you stop worrying."

"All right. When'd you quit Zach Hughes?"

"Last night. I shacked it in the whole sixty miles since then and I'm too tired to stand here blabbing."

RILEY walked to the sleeping camps, stuck his head in at the first and went on to the second. Soon sixty young lumberjacks, tall, husky, confident of their strength and skill, were gathered around him.

"Why ain't you been up to see us before?" one demanded. "You're only ten miles from here."

"Waited until I heard you weren't hanging up any tallies," Riley said.

"Been nobody to ride us." A canthook man grinned.

"You'll get ridden until the last log's in Pine Falls," Riley snarled. "I've got every cork in my shoes filed down to a needle point and I'm using 'em on you."

Dave Morton departed early the next morning. Riley Greer went on to Camp Two and spent a day looking over the work. Despite his illness, Dave had operated the camps well. He furnished good food, paid top wages, was respected as a logger. The lumberjacks, proud of their ability, each zealous of his integrity as a workman, had given everything they had.

Only the younger men in Camp One had slumped. Their loyalty had been to Riley Greer. Riley had whipped half of them. He was a better man with a canthook or on a log in white water, and without his dominating presence their work had lacked zest. Getting out logs for a sick man had not appealed to them. Now their tallies jumped ten to fifteen per cent.

Riley rewarded them with curses for not having done as much for Dave Morton, and they grinned at his biting comments. The Morton camps were a happy lot.

When the work was going to suit him, Riley wrote a letter to Celia Hughes.

"I only told Dave I had quit working for your father," it read. "Dave is in bad shape and he would have died if he'd stuck here through the winter. I hope you'll see things my way when you have had time to think it over because there just wasn't any other way for me. And I hope you talk to your father. May be he is desperate and doing crazy things, but try to show him he can't win the way he planned because I'm going to get Dave's logs into the mill boom come hell or high water.

"I hope you have some nice sleigh rides behind Barney these days. Maybe pretty soon I can get down to Pine Falls and see you. If you want me to, I'll come anyway.

"Don't forget that when the drive is in I am going to marry you. I can't take you to Europe but I've got some money saved up, enough to go most any place short of there."

THE rifles came, and later Lute Mace appeared with his deerskin jacket and his black eyes glaring through whiskers that almost covered his face. Lute earned a living by shooting deer for logging camps but he hated lumberjacks and the first thing he did was to build a cabin a mile from Camp One. Riley went to see him.

"I'll show you where there's some deer," Riley said.

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"Nobody ever had to show me deer," Lute growled.

"This is a kind you never saw before."

Riley took him to the two dams Dave Morton had built on Fawn Creek and on down the tote road toward the Hughes camps.

"You can see how we're fixed," Riley said. "On a small stream like this, we've got to have those dams to get our logs out. And that tote road—we're sixty miles from town, which is a long drag. If we got a big snowfall to slow the tote teams, and then a lot of big timber was to be dropped across the road, we might run out of grub in the camps. Those dams—dynamite will explode in winter if it's handled right."

Lute's eyes gleamed. "It would be lumberjacks falling the trees and using powder," he said, and looked at his rifle. "I'll fix that."

"Lay off, you bloodthirsty beast," Riley growled. "I don't want any killing. What I'm hiring is your eyes. We'll get fresh meat from town, so don't worry about deer. But make a circle every day and watch for tracks. If you catch anybody trying to blow out a dam or block the tote road, scare 'em with a couple of shots. Then come and tell me."

A week later Riley received a letter from Celia. It was the thinnest envelope she had addressed to him.

"I am not writing hastily," the note read. "I have thought it over carefully. Since you have decided to make it war, I am compelled to state my allegiance. It can lie only one way. Do not come to Pine Falls because I will refuse to see you. And the idea of my marrying you is absurd."

CAMP ONE knew nothing of Celia Hughes but it received the full force of her letter. Each night Riley Greer posted the day's tallies on sleeping camp doors and then stood back and sneered at them.

Riley no longer sat on a deacon seat after supper and yarned with his men. For all his single purposed drive, he had always loved jokes and banter and the vaudeville shows the crew staged several nights a week in Camp One.

Now he remained in the office with the foreman, George Perkins, and the timekeeper, or walked the lonely tote road between camps. No one saw him smile. No one heard him speak of anything except logs.

Word came that Zach Hughes had gone into the woods and was his own walking boss. A letter from the office in Pine Falls said that Dave Morton had gone to a hospital in Minneapolis. Doctors had not sent word of his condition.

The office asked Riley to send his scalers' reports weekly, and Riley knew what that meant. Wholesalers who advanced supplies were keeping close tab on the cut to determine how much credit Dave Morton might have. Logs must be banked no matter what the weather, or food, hay and grain would be shut off.

Lute Mace became disgusted with his job. His secret hope of getting a shot at a marauding lumberjack was fading as his patrols failed to uncover a human track along river or tote road.

"Keep at it," Riley said. "They know I'm expecting something and they'll hope I forget."

January passed. Camp One chalked up the biggest tally in its history. Camp Two had seventy men, and it began to lead. Banked on the river were two million feet more than Dave Morton had planned.

But Zach Hughes did not make a move. Riley worried about that. Lute Mace's patrol was not a certain protection, and Riley had to be certain. He talked to Phil Richards, a young lumberjack he had known since boyhood. The next morning Phil got his time and went to town. A week later he was back in the woods, in Zach Hughes' Camp One, where Zach made his headquarters.

February passed. Dave Morton returned to Pine Falls, his health much better. Word came that Zach had closed one camp, was operating three with 180 men. His cut was not large. Tallies in the two Morton camps sometimes exceeded those in Hughes' three.

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Riley had no word of Celia and could not get any. He did not even know if she were in Pine Falls. Her last note had not been answered. Riley felt he was handicapped with a pen.

March passed with its first thaws and softening roads. Once a week Phil Richards sneaked out of Hughes' camp after bedtime and met Riley on the tote road. He had little to report except of a disgruntled crew that was constantly changing under Zach's harsh methods. Zach went to Pine Falls at least once a week, generally stayed two or three days. He drank, looked worried, was haggard. His cut was ten million under schedule and not all his logs would be hauled to the river.

APRIL came. Snow was leaving. Riley had the teamsters out at 3 o'clock to haul logs before the iced roads lost the night's frost. The winter's cut was on the bank of Fawn Creek, and it was four million more than Dave Morton had planned.

Riley Greer had no sense of triumph. The logs were worthless until they reached the mill, and he knew Zach Hughes must be in desperate straits. Then a note came from Celia:

"I was sure father was not himself that night and you must be convinced of it now. He has done nothing to interfere with Mr. Morton's logging. When I talked to him yesterday he admitted it was all a result of momentary desperation. I am more confident than ever that he is able to win by his own strength. Nothing in this is to be construed as indicating a change in my attitude toward you but I do feel that I should let you know how wrong and precipitate was your action last December."

Riley was about to toss the letter into the stove. He was angry, for a touch of shame had come. He knew he was cocksure and hasty. There had even been times, as his longing for Celia grew, when he wondered if he had not made a mistake. Riley put the note in a pocket.

Two nights later he was wakened by a dull roar. His first impression was of thunder, but when he looked out the window and saw icicles against the sky he was instantly awake.

"Roll out!" he yelled at George Perkins. "Rout out the crew."

He sent the timekeeper running in his shirttail while he pulled on his own clothes.

"I want half a dozen teams," he said to George. "Those scrapers we used last summer are in the warehouse. Half the men bring shovels and picks, the rest axes and saws. No breakfast."

"You gone crazy?"

"I've been crazy. She led me on."

"What she?"

"Shut up!" Riley snapped. "Dam Two has been blown out. Get the crew down there. Have the cook send breakfast. And don't let anybody stop to shave."

HE WAS out the door, running down the tote road. He ran more than two miles, turned east on a cut-out road on which the snow was unbroken. Riley's feet went through the heavy crust and it was hard going, but he kept lunging on until he came to Fawn Creek and the dam.

Water was flowing through. He could hear it fifty yards away. He could see a dark area on the snow on the opposite side. And when Riley reached the dam he found the gates and sluiceway had been blown out, that one end of the earthen embankment had been torn away.

The river was still frozen. Some water was running on top of the ice, some beneath. Much of the water with which Riley expected to drive logs out of the Fawn still lay in the woods in the form of snow. But snow had been melting rapidly. All of it was precious. Now Zach Hughes had robbed him of what might make the difference between victory and defeat.

"That you, Riley?" a voice came from behind him.

Riley whirled, answered. Lute Mace came forward swiftly on his moccasined feet.

"They got around you," Riley growled.

"I was here just before dark," Lute said. "I can't stay out all night."

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"All right. It's done. They're probably at the other dam now. You might stop 'em. I don't care how."

Lute vanished. It was five miles to the next dam. The deer hunter would cover the distance in less than an hour. Riley turned to examine the damage, plan repairs. He was ready when the first men arrived.

"What would anybody want to do that for?" one demanded in astonishment.

"To help get Dave's logs to the mill," Riley snarled. "It was Zach Hughes, and he'll be helping some more. Start felling that small pine beside the road."

More men came, and the first teams. Riley ordered big fires built to furnish light, set men to chopping out ice above the dam. George Perkins received directions for building a cofferdam beneath which repairs could be made. More fires were started to thaw out frozen ground for refilling the embankment.

The lumberjacks needed only a word. Their skill with axe and timber was employed at once, and they worked with the swift sure movements and resistless rush of their breed.

Then every man stopped. Heads went up. Bodies were rigid. A dull roar was echoing through the forest.

"There goes the other dam!"

"Send a man to Camp Two and rout out that crew," Riley said to George. "I'll take half this bunch and get down there. Rush the cofferdam. A warm day and the ice in the creek will lift. Then we're done for."

Daylight had come when Riley and his crew reached Dam One. The damage was about the same as upstream. Lute Mace was not in sight. Tracks leading from the scene of the blasting were plainly visible in the snow, and beside them were the prints of Lute's moccasins.

THE work continued all day. Cofferdams were erected and rebuilding begun. Entire new sluiceways were needed. Sluice gates were a bigger problem but the two camp blacksmiths said they could contrive the necessary hardware and lifts.

Lute Mace returned at noon and drew Riley aside.

"They had a team and cutter on the tote road," he said. "Two men. I chased 'em past the Hughes camps but they were driving fast."

"They didn't stop at Zach's?"

"Neither way. Came from town, did the job and went back."

"That's how they happened to be a few days early," Riley said. "Thought it had thawed more here."

"Wish I'd gotten just one shot," Lute mourned.

"You'll get another chance. And don't slip up on it."

That night Phil Richards came to see Riley. It was not a scheduled meeting.

"Hughes has got a new crew for the drive," he reported.

"Let the winter gangs go?"

"He kept about a hundred and thirty men and brought in fifty more today."

Riley's thoughts were wandering to other things. "That's about what Zach needs," he commented.

"Only you never saw river drivers like these lads," Phil said. "Not all in one crew anyhow."

"What do you mean?" Riley demanded.

"Zach musta gone to Chippewa Falls and picked up all the hoodlums and bouncers on the Skid Road. Every one's big and there ain't a whole set of ears and noses among 'em."

"Camp One can handle that kind," Riley scoffed.

"Sure, only a couple dropped some things from their turkeys. The rest laughed. Some showed what they had."

"What you driving at?"

"Ever see a crew go into the woods for a log drive carrying knuckle dusters and blackjacks?"

Riley Greer was all attention now.

"Few of 'em's got driving shoes," Phil Richards said. "I heard some laugh and tell how they wouldn't need any."

"Get back to Zach's camp," Riley exclaimed. "Keep tab on those lads. Soon's you see 'em get ready to start anything, let me know."

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"Sure," Phil grinned. "This is lookin' more like a war than a log drive."

"We got to get Dave's logs out."

"It'll take more'n peavies and pick poles. And here's another thing. Zach's got three or four halfbreeds hanging around. I'll try to find out what for."

A tote team was leaving the next morning and Riley sat down to write Dave Morton what was happening.

"Dave'll only worry," Riley muttered, and he tore up the paper.

He drew Celia's note from a pocket and read it again. Then he wrote across the bottom:

"I'm sending this back because you'll want to see it burned. And I'm believing you don't know what you're writing about. Zach Hughes blew out Dave Morton's two dams on Fawn Creek yesterday morning and he hired a bunch of hoodlums to fight Dave's men. Even if you should be playing Zach's game for him, I'll marry you anyhow when the drive's in. Remember what I told you about how to drive that Barney horse. I'm holding the reins now."

VI

THE two dams were rebuilt. The days were warm, snow melted rapidly and work was completed none too soon. As it was, ice tore out the cofferdam at Dam Two before the task was completed. Men worked in the cold rushing water to finish the job.

Lute Mace scouted through the woods to learn if Zach Hughes was trying to discover how successful his dynamiting had been, but Lute was unable to learn that spies were at work. Riley expected a second attack if Zach knew the dams were intact again. He did not fear it so long as the men were on the job. After that he stationed guards. He chose men who knew something of firearms, placed six at each dam with instructions to maintain constant watch and to shoot on sight.

The deer hunter was kept roaming the woods. Phil Richards left the Hughes' camp every night and met Riley. Zach's men were getting ready for the drive. None seemed to know about the dynamiting of the dams. It was not talked about. Zach had gone to Pine Falls but returned at once.

Riley Greer prowled ceaselessly from camps to dams and along the tote road. He let the men understand thoroughly that Zach Hughes was intent on holding up the Morton drive. Riley said he did not know why, leaving the cause to some trouble between the lumbermen themselves. But he did cite the fact that Dave Morton was ill, was helpless before the wanton attacks of a ruthless and powerful foe.

The story, as Riley knew, did not bring fear but a fierce determination. It welded one hundred and thirty men behind him.

Ice was thick in Fawn Creek and, except in a few places, was a long while going out. Snow had melted on all open spots and south slopes and as the time approached for the stream to burst free, Riley watched it constantly.

Riley had laid his plans months before. He had known Fawn Creek was a terrific natural obstacle. Deer River was bad, but the difficulty there would be in following Zach's drive. Zach would get the cream of the water. Even were relations friendly, a leading drive would make it difficult for the Morton crew.

"Your one chance is to get past the Hughes rollways before he breaks 'em out," George Perkins had said.

Now that was imperative. When George learned that Hughes was fighting, was ready to employ dirty tricks and violence, he abandoned any hope of winning through.

"With a hundred miles of river between here and the mill, and him ahead of you all the way, you ain't got a chance."

"Ice will go out sooner in the Fawn than in the Deer," Riley insisted. "All we've got to do is get there early. Zach won't roll his logs in with ours."

"The way Zach's started, he'll do anything."

"The dams are watched. Lute is prowling night and day. We've got a hundred and thirty men waiting for him."

"May be," George said. "But Zach ain't quit. You've got to have all the breaks from now on, feller, or you're done for."

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PHIL RICHARDS came into camp at midnight and called Riley from the office. He was breathless.

"I won't have to run that ten miles again," he said. "Zach caught me leaving tonight."

"How?" Riley demanded. "What did he say?"

"I didn't wait to listen. I'd snuck out after everybody was asleep. He and a bunch of those hoodlums gave me ten-foot legs when they jumped from behind the stable."

"Zach was laying for you, eh?"

"I don't think so. They were going some place. But I couldn't stop to find out where. And all those halfbreeds were gone tonight."

Riley called George Perkins.

"I knew Zach hadn't quit," the foreman said. "How many men with him, Phil?"

"Six or eight."

"Carrying anything, tools or a sack of something?"

"It's a dark night to see well. The dark's the only reason I got away."

"Anybody going near those dams will be shot," Riley said. "They might be trying to break out our rollways. If they dumped a bunch of logs onto the ice they'd hang us."

Riley ran to the sleeping camps and roused the crew.

"We'll scatter them along the river," he said to George while the men dressed. "Give those Chippewa Falls Skid Road bouncers something to remember."

"Funny time of year for the woods to be on fire," Phil Richards said. "Slash is too green and wet to burn."

All three saw a rosy glow in the northern sky. As they stared in bewilderment the reflection on low clouds burst into brighter, redder light.

"Camp Two!" George Perkins muttered.

Riley Greer started running toward the tote road. Blind rage had started him but he stopped quickly.

"Whatever it is, I can't get there before the camp is burned out," he said as he came back.

"The hoodlums with Zach couldn't have made that far by now," Phil Richards protested.

"Maybe Zach started some of those halfbreeds early," George Perkins suggested. "Maybe—"

Light had flashed in the sky to the southeast, a stab of flame. As George stared, the roar of an explosion came accross the forest.

Men were tumbling out of the sleeping camps, and there was no need to tell them what had happened. Dam Two had been blown out again despite an armed guard. It had been blown out while a head of melted snow water was above it. There could be no repairs now.

Every riverman knew that. Every riverman knew what the glow in the northern sky meant. Even when the faint sound of a rifle came from the direction of the dam, they derived no satisfaction from the possibility that a dynamiter had been shot. For they knew Riley Greer was beaten.

Riley knew it in his mind. Dam Two was essential in driving the Fawn. And part of the driving camp equipment had been stored in the warehouse at Camp Two.

"Zach must hate Dave pretty hard," George Perkins said.

"Don't hate him at all," Riley snarled. "Only trying to steal Dave's timber."

"Dave ought to get the law on him."

"What law? Sixty miles north of Pine Falls and all empty woods. I don't even know what county we're in, if there is a county up here. There's no law to—"

Riley broke off.

"Zach sure don't want any law around," George said.

"Let's get down to the dam and see what they did," Riley growled. "We'll take the crew and tools. Might save some water."

BUT Riley was not thinking of the dam. As he strode ahead in the darkness he considered his problem. He had determined to get Dave Morton's logs to the mill, and he knew now it was an impossibility. Zach Hughes had blocked him. Zach could continue to block him. Zach

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had used dynamite. He still had his crew of imported fighters, and they had not been brought in just for show. That gang, sweeping up and down the river after the drive started, could attack small groups of Morton men and put them out of commission.

"If Hughes don't want our logs to move, we might as well quit," George Perkins panted as he ran beside Riley.

"You mean we're licked?"

"I don't see anything else."

"I never knew you to be licked without leaving a mark on the other fellow," Riley snarled. "I never was licked while I was on my feet. Use your head, man. We ain't even had a fight yet."

George ran a rew yards, and he began to chuckle. "It sure could be a fight," he said.

"It's going to be."

They left the tote road and went down to the dam, shouting their identity as they drew near. The guard had a fire going. All six men began to talk excitedly.

"One of you!" Riley barked. "The dam gone?"

"It's holding, but it's weak," a riverman said. "They tossed the dynamite in a sack and it fell short of the sluiceway."

"You hit any of 'em?"

"Don't know. They had us fooled. We heard someone coming down from the tote road. Wouldn't answer. I took a shot at 'em. Then somebody on the other side of the river lit a fuse and pitched the sack from that brush over there."

Riley went across the dam. The explosion would have wrecked the sluiceway, would have released a torrent, had it been thirty feet farther out. As it was, the earthen embankment had been seriously weakened. A great hole had been ripped out on the lower side.

"Take care of it, George," Riley said when he returned. "I've got some figuring to do."

The crew began work. George Perkins ordered short lengths of timber cut. He set other men to digging rocks and boulders on the east bank and rolling them into the hole the dynamite had made. The chunks of logs were mixed with these. Shovels dug into the bank and earth was tossed out in relays.

"We don't need a team and a scraper," George said.

Riley Greer did not hear him. He had gone back to the edge of the forest and sat down on a windfall, away from the dam, out of sight of the red glare in the northern sky.

A decision must be reached, and at once. Riley knew he had been dodging it. He knew now he had dodged it because of Celia Hughes.

His instinct and the situation called for only one course of action. If Dave Morton were to be saved from a ruthless attack, a defensive campaign could never win. Zach Hughes must be crushed. He must be eliminated as an obstacle. If Riley were to do that, Zach would be ruined. Zach would lose his big mill, timber holdings, home, prestige. And Celia would bear the brunt of that loss.

Riley thought more of her than of his immediate problem. Above all else in life, he wanted Celia Hughes. Sometimes he had seen her as a high spirited thoroughbred that must be tamed. He remembered now what he had said to her that first day.

"Only way to prove who's boss is to be boss," and, "Man or horse, don't ever let 'em know you think of quitting."

Riley Greer jumped to his feet. Suddenly he felt buoyant, confident as he had always been. Celia had disclosed a weakness in him. Now he strode down to the dam and watched the work.

"This ain't bad," he said to George Perkins. "By daylight the dam will be stronger'n ever."

"Yeah, until Zach burns some more powder," the foreman grumbled.

"He's burned the last," Riley laughed. "We'll go down to Zach's camps today and tell him so."

VII

GABE SHELTON, foreman of Camp Two, arrived before dawn to report that the warehouse and stables had been

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burned. The horses had been gotten out but nothing else had been saved.

"Half the tents and a lot of pick poles and peavies are gone," Gabe said. "We had no chance. Everybody asleep, and they pushed over a barrel of coal oil and tossed a match into it."

"Not so bad as it might have been," Riley grinned. "Zach didn't have so much luck. And he won't get another chance."

Gabe looked at Riley in the light of the big fires. He had not seen Riley grin since Christmas.

"It's the only way," the foreman said. "The boys have been grumbling. Wondered why you didn't give the word."

Riley took Phil Richards aside and asked where the Hughes crew was quartered.

"He moved 'em all to Camp One yesterday," Phil said. "Zach must have figured that if he blew out this dam the water would take the ice out in the Deer and he could start his drive."

"How many's he got?"

"There's the fifty knuckle-duster lads. I counted the rest careful. A hundred and twenty-five."

"That's a hundred and seventy-five to our hundred and thirty," Riley said. "Wish they were in two camps."

"They won't be expecting us," Phil grinned. "And our Camp One bunch is as good as any hundred river pigs in Wisconsin."

"But I want some of 'em left to drive logs," Riley warned.

A man was sent to Camp One to get Riley's driving team and buggy and go on to the second camp with orders for the crew to start down the tote road at once. Word was passed among the men working on the dam and efforts were redoubled as the rivermen chuckled and shouted.

Lute Mace appeared. He had tracked five dynamiters straight to Zach Hughes' Camp One but had taken up the trail too late to get a shot at them. The deer hunter's rage startled Riley. The man's accuracy with a rifle was amazing and his hatred of lumberjacks fanatical. Riley did not want shooting now.

"Go down to Dam One and watch it today," he told Lute. "Send the men over to the tote road and have them wait."

Repairs on the dam were completed soon after dawn. One man with a rifle was left on guard and the crew went to camp for breakfast. An hour later the seventy men arrived from Camp Two. Riley Greer climbed onto a stump.

"Zach Hughes sent for fifty bouncers from Chippewa Falls saloons," he said. "They've got brass knuckles and blackjacks. They haven't any driving shoes."

The rivermen hooted and jeered.

"We know how to handle that kind!" they shouted.

"And they've got forty-five more men than we have," Riley said. "I ain't ordering any man to go with me."

The crowd hooted again.

"Those knuckle dusters will break a few heads," Riley went on. "I never used anything except my hands in a fight but against Skid Road bums like that I'm wondering if a club ain't the only thing."

A big Miramichi jumped onto the stump beside Riley.

"Clubs!" he shouted. "I wouldn't put such a load on my conscience. But ever since they blew out our dams my fists have been itchin' so to cuddle up to a Hughes man's jaw I've had to rub salve on 'em so I could sleep nights."

Wild yells greeted that. The crew began to move toward the tote road. It was a mob. One hundred and thirty rampant individualists, each proud of his strength and skill, comprised that crowd of pushing, shouting men.

Yet it was a crowd completely controlled. Riley Greer knew that. The rivermen were disciplined by years of toil and danger together, by a fine intelligence sharpened in daily hazard, by admiration for and loyalty to their leader. Jostling, pushing, running, acting like boys, they were still a terribly efficient and effective machine. And that machine was now bent on the destruction of Zach Hughes.

RILEY GREER thought of that, and of Celia, while they walked down the tote road, but he never missed a step.

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The thing he was about to do was inevitable.

After a mile Riley began to organize the march. A scouting party was placed a half mile in the lead with orders to rush back word if the enemy were sighted.

"Zach may figure on this," Riley said to his two foremen.

"If he's got any sense, he'll know we can't take all that lying down," Gabe Shelton agreed.

Like horses on a cold morning, prancing and mettlesome for a while, then settling to the grind, the men ceased crowding and shouting comments. They walked at a steady clip but the double line in the tote road began to lengthen. Gaps appeared as the miles slipped back. The column stretched longer and longer, following the twists of the narrow aisle in the forest.

Riley Greer, in the lead, did not see this. He and Phil Richards, the only ones who knew the roads and arrangement of the Hughes camps, were conferring on the best mode of attack. Outnumbered, they needed the element of surprise, needed a divided and demoralized foe, if they expected to win.

They agreed that the safest approach was on Zach Hughes' tote road. It led through rough, unlogged country and the forest would permit them to get within fifty yards of Camp One before they could be seen.

"And it's the last place Zach will expect us," Phil said. "Because we know the layout, he'll figure we'll come in through the slash or on a logging road."

One of the advance guard came back when they were within half a mile of the Hughes camp and reported they had met a halfbreed. But when they had tried to talk to him he had run.

"Which way?" Riley asked.

"South side and back toward you."

"Then he didn't head for the camp," Phil said.

A yell sounded behind them. Riley jumped out of the wheel tracks and looked back. The road had turned sharply and he could see only a few yards.

Then a roar of shouting came through the forest, a wave of yips and yells and bellows. The column stopped. Riley Greer started back. But the woods on both sides seemed to hurl men onto the road. They came from everywhere, yelling, with fists clenched, and they swept through and over the vanguard of the Morton crew.

Many went down before the rush. Riley was among them, and before he struck the ground he knew what had happened, knew why Zach Hughes had kept moccasined halfbreeds about camp. Riley knew that he himself had been caught napping, that his crew had been surprised by a superior force.

And it was far worse than Riley knew. A swift runner had brought news of the attack. Zach's men had been ready, had been shifted quickly. The knuckle-duster crew was the spearhead and it had charged in a compact mass from thick brush beside the road.

Their first sweep had broken the column in two, and at that moment two other groups of rivermen had charged the head and the rear. Almost before Riley's men knew the battle had started, they were split. And each section was being attacked from both sides.

THE north woods had never seen a battle like this. Three hundred lumberjacks, husky and able, were at each other's throats. Hoarse growls, grunts and shouts mounted to a steady roar. Even the crunching of fists against flesh could be heard. For more than one hundred yards along the narrow, twisting road the battle raged.

Riley Greer did not stay down. As quickly as he had comprehended what was happening, he understood that he faced defeat. He had lost for Dave Morton, and he had lost for Celia. He knew he could never go to her if Zach Hughes conquered, and when he began to fight he felt that it was for her.

He arose fighting. He battered fists into a strange face, into another. When a third man tried to grapple with him, Riley slipped to one side, sending in a crunching right to the ribs.

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The battle at the head of the column had now resolved itself into a vast number of swirling individual contests. Often two Hughes men engaged one member of Dave Morton's crew. Others fought singly. It was the lumberjack method, to pit himself and his strength against another of his kind. And Riley knew this would never win such a contest.

He saw Gabe Shelton and worked over to him.

"Stick close!" he shouted.

Together they charged two men who were battling George Perkins, swamped them under a resistless rush.

"Stick close!" Riley shouted. "Morton men! Stick close!"

Phil Richards joined them, a grin showing through blood. The big Miramichi who had scorned a club now swept the heads of two foes together and flung his victims at Riley's feet.

"Snow plow!" he bellowed. "We'll clear this road!"

More Morton men flocked to them. Many were bleeding. Their numbers grew and they charged back on the road.

But they fought only lumberjacks, men like themselves, men using their fists. Around the turn, where the hoodlums had split the center of the column, where brass knuckles and blackjacks were swinging, it was another story.

The center of the thin line of Morton men had vanished under that first charge, a score rolled under by fifty.

Evidently the knuckle-duster wielders had split them according to plan. Twenty-five began to charge the rear, the others the front. They moved in a compact mass, moved swiftly. Many a saloon brawl had taught them the advantage of striking first, of putting the other man out of commission before he got set to fight.

Backward they pushed the two halves of the column, while Zach's crew crushed the ends. Individually the Morton men fought like champions. But each found himself battling many. Steadily the hoodlums rolled them under, and when the Skid Road gang put a man down he did not get up at once.

Zach Hughes' regular lumberjacks fought efficiently so long as they had the upper hand. At the rear of the column they jumped into an immediate advantage with their surprise attack. Here again the Morton men fought furiously as individuals, but their long drawn out line and the compact grouping of their foes always brought one man against several. Exultant shouts of victory began to ring through the forest.

Riley Greer heard them. He could not see far down the narrow, twisting road. He did not have much time to look. But he could understand what was happening.

"Stick close!" he shouted. "It's our only chance."

HE SENT Gabe Shelton and George Perkins around the edges of fighting groups to haul Morton men out and get them in line. In five minutes he had twenty-five of his crew sweeping steadily up the road. A little later he had fifty.

They gained the bend. Battles and log jams, the silent struggle with the forest through long northern winters, a great pride in their leader and in themselves, these had long ago eliminated all culls from Riley Greer's crew. Each man had been tested and proved.

Their keen minds grasped situations quickly. Nervous systems attuned in the hazards of their work produced simultaneous reactions. Now that they saw they were losing, they fought savagely but with composure. Their movements were bewilderingly swift, and astonishingly certain. The composite picture of the group about Riley Greer was of a blasting whirlwind.

That group of fifty men met the Skid Road gang head on. The big Miramichi was the first to see a blackjack swinging, and he let out a roar in which rage and joy were mingled.

"Now we can crack some heads!" he shouted.

He leaped forward, wrenched a billy from a man's hand and crumpled him.

The Morton men yelled and charged. Theirs was the wrath of men who fought

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for a leader, who hated dirty methods, and they battled skilled but hired sluggers.

"Leave a clean rear!" Phil Richards shouted. "Roll every log into the river!"

For a moment the fighting was savage and ruthless. Then the knuckle-duster gang broke before the rage of Riley's men. They ran back up the road. Some darted into the brush. And when it was every man for himself in that crew, their efficiency fled.

Riley's men swept on, the group swelling constantly. Many of Zach Hughes' regular rivermen were still in the road, but they did not fight for a cause and they soon scattered into the woods.

The Skid Road gang was busy mopping up the rear of the Morton column when Riley struck. That fight was the shortest of the long battle. In a few minutes the rout was complete.

Nor did the pursuit last long. The hoodlums took to the woods. Riley's men began drifting back.

They were a sagging, blood-splashed crew. But there was pride in their step and a glint to their eyes. They walked close-ranked, as will men who have fought and won together.

None had escaped punishment. Every face was cut and bleeding. A few knuckles had been crushed on solid skulls. Great lumps rose on heads where blackjacks had swung home.

But those men had been in the woods since September. Their bodies were of rawhide. No prize-fighter had ever been in better condition than these veterans of the logging camps.

They went back now, in a compact column. They left their victims in the road but ministered to their comrades, helping dazed men to their feet, carrying those who had been knocked unconscious. A conquering army, they swept on to Zach Hughes' camp.

Riley knew what they intended to do, and he made no effort to stop them. Blood dripped from Riley's crushed nose. Blood flowed from a long gash in his scalp where brass knuckles had slashed him. His yellow hair was matted with sweat and blood. His shirt was torn. His left arm hung stiffly. He limped.

His whole body ached and screamed with soreness; and later his wounds would be even more painful.

But he had won. He exulted in that as he marched at the head of his men. He exulted as he came around a corner of the stable and found Zach Hughes hitching his driving team to a buckboard.

ZACH looked at Riley, and then at the column of men behind him. Zach did not have to be told who had lost that battle, and his nerveless fingers dropped the trace he was hooking to a singletree.

But he did not retreat, and there was no fear in his eyes as he looked at Riley Greer.

"I'll use this team," Riley said. "Couple of my men need to see a doctor. They ain't used to fighting brass knuckles, Zach."

For a moment the two men faced each other. Riley knew a conqueror's pity for the man he has beaten, and a conqueror's resentment for the losses inflicted by that man.

The crew brushed Zach aside, finished hitching the horses. Others went on.

"Save some blankets for these lads," Riley called. "And we need tents, peavies and pick poles since Camp Two was burned."

The men went into sleeping camps, cook camp, warehouse and stables. They took what they needed, led the horses out. They knocked over lamps and lanterns, struck matches.

"You ain't giving me a chance," Zach Hughes said.

Riley shrugged with brief contempt. Tough men, strong men, didn't whine or lick their wounds for men to see.

"You made the rules," Riley answered.

Flames were roaring. "Now we can drive some logs," Gabe Shelton said.

The two unconscious men were placed in the buckboard. The crew gathered up their booty and started toward the tote road.

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At the edge of the clearing they met Celia Hughes and Dave Morton. The two were walking. Celia's dark eyes flashed.

"Some of your hoodlums took Barney and the buggy away from me!" she cried furiously.

Riley looked at her steadily but his eyes told nothing.

"I haven't any hoodlums," he said. "Those were your father's men, saloon rowdies he hired to do this to my crew," and he pointed at the battered countenances of the men behind him.

"What's been going on here?" Dave Morton broke in.

"Nothing to worry about," Riley said. "I'm starting the drive in the morning. Your logs will get to the mill."

Celia's eyes were full of wonder as she stared at him.

"But you wrote that my father had blown up your dams," Celia exclaimed.

His answer was brusque, and nothing in his manner yielded an inch. She was Zach's daughter, wasn't she?

"He did, but I rebuilt them. Last night he tried it again."

"Celia told me you had written her that," Dave said. "We started at daylight. I didn't want any trouble and—"

"You ain't got any," Riley cut in.

"But I won't believe—" Celia began, and then her father pushed through the group.

She started to speak again, and then she saw his face.

"How about it, Zach?" Dave asked.

Zach looked at Riley. "I'm licked," he said. "Licked fair and square."

"You knew this at Christmas when you came back," Dave said to Riley. "When you sent for those rifles and Lute Mace. Why didn't you tell me?"

"You had enough to worry about, being sick," Riley answered.

"Yeah, and Riley never hit back at Zach until this morning," George Perkins broke in hotly. "Not until Zach blew up another dam. He ought to a come over and burned this bunch out a month ago."

Dave Morton looked at his walking boss.

"I've been in a tight way, lad," he said. "Still am. Been thinking about it, and because I've got to get these logs out, because I don't want you jumping the job again, I'm giving you a half interest in all my debts, and what chances I've got to make some money. How about it?"

"You don't have to do that, Dave," Riley grinned.

THE crew cheered and went on. Riley told one of the men to bring his driving team to take Celia and Dave to town.

Dave Morton dropped back to talk with Zach.

"You ought to know better'n to try to beat me when Riley is on the job," he began.

Their voices lowered. They were both old and both were tired.

Riley looked at Celia.

She seemed to be waiting for him to speak. She could dissolve this wall between them with one word, but first she must be certain that he wanted it—needed it.

"Why did you come up here?" he asked.

"That letter—if it were true—if there were fighting—"

"I'm taking this drive out. When I get to Pine Falls I'm going to marry you. Like I said."

Celia did not seem to hear. She was staring at his bleeding and battered face, at the tawny hair matted with blood.

All the anger and pride were gone from her dark eyes. Riley had never seen them so soft. She lifted a hand and a finger brushed his cheek.

"Please," she whispered. "Let me dress your face. I can't bear to think of you being cut—hurt."

Riley's scowl was a curious mixture of both tenderness and pride.

"I'm a river pig and you'll see me this way again," Riley said. "Often. Because I'm going to marry you."

"I've never doubted but what you would," Celia said.

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MEN of DARING
by Stooks Allen
Flying Jack-of-All-Trades
ASHLEY McKINLEY HAS FLOWN EVERYTHING AND EVERYWHERE; HE HAS PILOTED BALLOONS, DIRIGIBLES AND PLANES; FROM THE SKY HE HAS LOOKED DOWN ON JUNGLES, BATTLEFIELDS AND POLAR WASTES. AND HE'S AN EXPERT AIR CAMERAMAN.
McKINLEY GOT HIS FIRST FLYING EXPERIENCE IN THE WORLD WAR. AS COMMANDER OF THE 12TH BALLOON COMPANY HE SAW SOME OF THE HEAVIEST FIGHTING—AND MANAGED TO ESCAPE WITHOUT SERIOUS INJURY.
Capt. McKinley
AFTER THE WAR HE PLACED SECOND IN THE ARMY BALLOON RACE. THEN HE TURNED DIRIGIBLE PILOT IN THE EARLY DAYS WHEN FLYING THESE FRAIL SHIPS WAS A RISKY BUSINESS. NEXT, HE TOOK UP AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY AND BECAME SO PROFICIENT THAT ADMIRAL BYRD TOOK HIM ON HIS FIRST SOUTH POLE EXPEDITION. THE FLYING CAMERAMAN'S WORK MADE AN INVALUABLE CONTRIBUTION TO SCIENCE; HE MAPPED 1600 MILES OF LAND, PREVIOUSLY UNEXPLORED. BYRD AND BALCHEN AGREE THAT McKINLEY'S FAST THINKING AT ONE POINT SAVED THEM ALL FROM DISASTER.
THEY WERE FLYING OVER A YAWNING GLACIER WHEN McKINLEY SWIFTLY TOSSED A HEAVY BAG OF FOOD THROUGH A DOOR. LIGHTENED, THE CRAFT WAS JUST ABLE TO AVOID CRASHING INTO A WALL OF ICE. FOR HIS COURAGE ON THE EXPEDITION McKINLEY WAS GIVEN THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS.
LAST YEAR, WHILE WORKING ON RUBBER BALLOON FLOATS TO REPLACE PONTOONS ON SEAPLANES, McKINLEY WAS INJURED IN A PLANE ACCIDENT. HE SOON RECOVERED AND HIS INVENTION HAS BEEN PERFECTED. THE FLOATS ARE TO BE USED ON NAVY SEAPLANES AND CLIPPER SHIPS.

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

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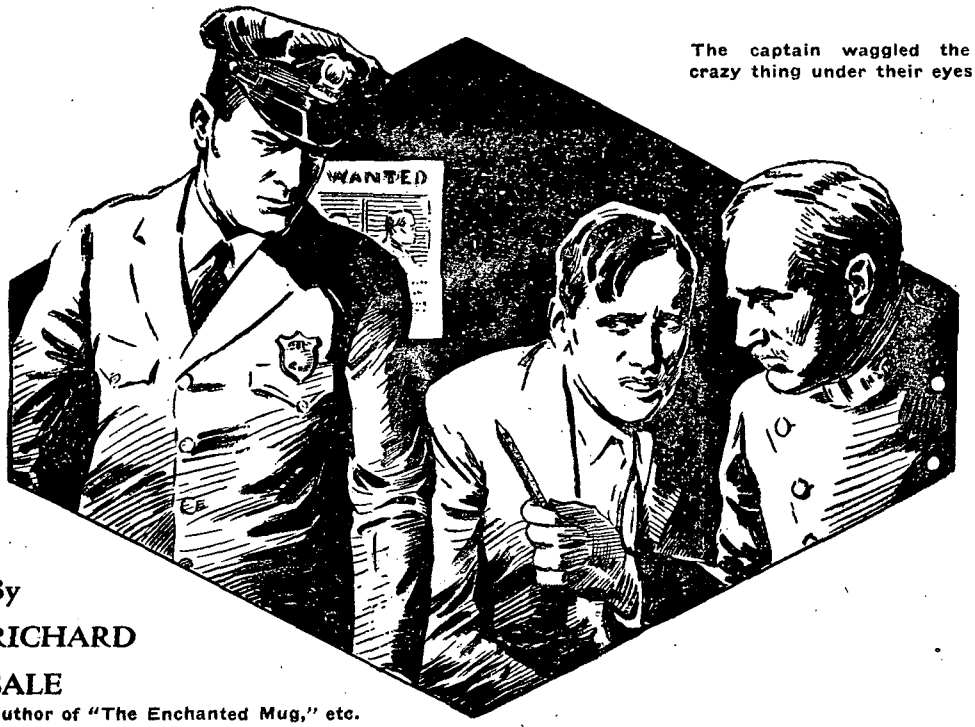

The captain waggled the crazy thing under their eyes

By RICHARD SALE

Author of "The Enchanted Mug," etc.

Death Had a Pencil

Captain McGrail, that Scheherezade of the Homicide Bureau, rares back and lets fly with another of his yarns to prove that Manhattan can make Baghdad look like a one-night stand

"SO IT'S you again," said Captain McGrail. "I'll say this for you, young fella. You always come in when I'm not busy."

I said: "Are you ever busy?"

"Busy?" he snorted. "Haven't you read the papers lately? Didn't you see how I cleaned up that poisoning case? Five deaths. It took a good man to do that. I suppose the *Chronicle* wants another story."

"That's right," I said. "And to tell the truth, Captain, some of these pretty fables you spin aren't bad at all. People seem to like them—and more important, the city editor likes them even more. I got bumped."

"Bumped?"

"A raise."

Captain McGrail settled back in his chair and put his feet on the desk and lighted a cigar. "I was thinking," he said, "that you ought to cut me in on these stories. After all, all you have to do is write them and that's easy. We could make a lot of money. I got thousands of stories like those."

"Baloney," I said. "I brought you apricots the last time and I brought you beer and pretzels the time before that. That's your shake of graft. And I'll bet you run dry of these yarns before I get gray hair. You know what I brought today?"

"What?" Captain McGrail said suspiciously.

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I showed him and he looked pleased. He rubbed his hand across his gray mustache and his eyes lighted. "Lollypops," he said. "Say, you've got something there. There's only one thing I like better than a lollypop and that's a stick of licorice." I made a note of that. "Come on, boy, pass one over here and let's get under way."

"What flavor?"

"Orange," he said.

"Okay," said I. "Start your story."

He leaned back, sucking the lollypop, and he shook his head. "Today you'll call the story. I know, I know. You want another fairy tale. You want a story that sounds as if it could happen and never did. Like the invisible man, and the enchanted mug and the lucky pigs. I've got a million of them. All you have to do is to look at some of the junk on my desk, pick a piece out and ask about it and I'll go." He waved the lollypop at me gravely. "But I want to impress upon you that every one of these stories is the gospel truth."

"Heh heh," I said. I reached over and picked up a gaudy colored thing that was shaped like a pencil, had a sharp steel point and on the other end had a golden band. There was writing on the golden band in what I took to be Persian, and I was right. The pencil itself—actually it was a sort of scriber—was a work of cloisonné, with the copper designs, the multi-colored porcelain baked in.

I said: "Here you are, Captain."

"Son," said Captain McGrail, "you couldn't have picked a better item."

"What is it?" I said.

"That," he said, "is what killed Wilbert Althouse. That is what burned the K-3 dirigible to ashes."

"Fine," I said. "But what is it?"

"It's a Persian scriber, some two thousand years old," said Captain McGrail. "It supposed to have belonged to a high priest and it's cursed."

"It is, eh?"

"You don't believe me, eh? You see those hero—those hieroglyphics—you see that writing on the golden band? You know what that says in Persian?"

"Hold your horses," I said. "I can see the yarn coming. Never mind what it says. Tell me the story and I'll find out what it says in the telling, but don't bend my ears. . . ."

•

ONCE upon a time (said Captain McGrail), there was a guy named Peter Hoff. He was thirty-two years old and he was big and thin. He was pleasant looking, a little homely, but not actually ugly. He was an appealing sort of guy and he had the knack of making you believe in what he was saying.

One morning, early in May, I was sitting right here in this office when the telephone rang. I picked it up and said hello and a voice said, "This is Peter Hoff speaking. You don't know me, but you're going to."

"That's fine," I said. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"Well," he said, "I'm afraid I've killed a man. I want to know what to do about it."

It sounded like a rib so I said, "That's easy, son. All you have to do is come down here, give yourself up, and write a complete confession."

"You won't third-degree me or anything?" Hoff said.

"We'll treat you like a lamb," I said. "Just so long as you're in a disclosing mood. You wouldn't mind telling me just who it is you've murdered?"

"Well," Hoff said, apologetically at that, "you're not going to believe me, I'm afraid. But I did it, all right. It wasn't my fault and I had no intention of doing any such thing, but I did it nevertheless. I didn't know what I was doing. I killed a man named Wilbert Althouse. You can read about it in the morning paper. That's when I found out I'd killed him."

"Sure," I said. "Well, you just come down here, Mr. Hoff, and we'll talk it over, eh?"

"Very well," he said. "And I'll bring along the Persian pencil and explain. You see, it was really the pencil did it, not I.

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But of course, I own the pencil and I'm responsible."

"Of course," I said. "You just come down."

After he hung up, I was stymied. The guy sounded earnest enough, but I'd had my leg pulled by newshawks before and I didn't want to be taken again.

Why, the guy was wacky. If it was on the level, he belonged in the observation ward at Bellevue. And if it was on the level and he showed up, that was the place I was going to send him to. Wilbert Althouse had been one of the biggest financiers in the country. He was worth anyhow ninety millions of dollars. He owned one of the biggest private banking houses in the world. He never moved anywhere without an armed guard and you couldn't even walk on the street in front of his bank without having the eyes of five guards on you every second. I'd read in the morning newspapers that he had collapsed at his home on Long Island the night before and had died of a heart attack an hour or so later.

So I could just see a dipsy doodle like Peter Hoff having knocked off Wilbert Althouse without getting even spotted, and then calling me up to tell me all about it.

YOU could have knocked me over with a sigh an hour later when there was a knock on the office door and I said, "Who is it?" and a voice replied quietly, "Peter Hoff, sir. May I come in?"

I said, "Come in," and I thought that if it was a joke, somebody was carrying it a sight too far. But the door opened and he came in. He was just the way I've described. He shook hands with me and looked very sober. "Have a seat," I said. "What's all this malarkey about you killing Wilbert Althouse? You know darn well you didn't kill him."

Hoff looked bothered. He rubbed his chin and for a moment I thought he was going to cry. "I know," he said. "It sounded silly on the telephone. I knew you thought it was a joke of some kind, but it really isn't. I didn't actually kill Wilbert Althouse with my own hands or anything like that, but I think—I know—I'm responsible for his death, and I wanted to give myself up."

I called up the chief medical examiner and told him to drop in and see me. Then I turned back to Hoff and I said, "You're a nice looking guy. You don't have that goony look in your eyes. I don't think you've got a screw loose anywhere. So what's the idea?"

"I don't know how to begin," Hoff said. "You're not going to believe me. I won't blame you. I hardly believe it myself. But it's true. It sounds fantastic. It *is* fantastic. But I know I caused Althouse's death. I've been experimenting on dogs and cats and it worked with them. I thought I'd go crazy. And then I decided to try it on a human being and I saw a picture of Althouse in the paper and said that he would be a severe test, so I—"

"I can't make any sense out of what you're saying," I said.

"Captain McGrail," Hoff replied gravely, "I have in my possession the pencil of Death."

Just then the M.E. came in. I told him to take it easy and I asked him about Althouse. "Did you perform the autopsy on that job?" I asked.

"No," he said. "Lewis, the M.E. of Nassau County, did it. But I was there. Why?"

"What happened to Althouse?"

"Coronary thrombosis," said the M.E. "Clot knocked him off. That's all there was to it. Bum ticker. His number was called."

"All right," I said. "This man thinks he murdered Althouse."

The M.E. laughed. "I'd like to hear how."

So Hoff explained.

HE SPOKE quietly and honestly and he didn't fool around. It seems he was the black sheep of his family. He and his uncle—both his parents were dead—didn't get along. He was cast out, like you've read, and put on his own. His aunt

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was dead, his uncle was the only one left to him in the world. Hoff had kicked around, been a cowboy and a sailor and had finally wound up in the theater as an actor. Times had been hard. He hadn't worked much. Then he met an old actor who felt his number was up. He wouldn't tell the man's name. But this old ham gave him a wonderful thing. A scriber, which was to say a Persian pencil.

"I remember how he gave it to me," Hoff said. "I thought he was crazy, but he said to me that as a trinket, the scriber was worth a little money, that I might get perhaps ten dollars for it at a hock shop. But, he said, as a power, the scriber was priceless. It had, he said, the power of death. It was, he said, Death's own pencil. He showed me its golden band around the top where there was writing in Persian and he translated for me: *This point writes away the life of the living.*

"He told me that a long time back it had belonged to a Persian high priest and that it had been the instrument with which all high execution sentences were signed. As such it had become cursed. If you ever had an enemy, he told me, this pencil would do away with your enemy and leave you free. He gave it to me and I put it away and forgot about it."

The M.E. looked at me and winked. I said, "Go on, kid."

"Several nights ago," said Hoff tensely, "I came across it. I remembered what that old actor had said. I needed money and I was broke and I had some idea of pawning the thing. It was very beautiful. I decided to experiment with it. I had a newspaper and I opened to the sporting page. There was a dog show on at Madison Square Garden. I took the pencil and I marked an X on a picture of a Russian wolfhound. . . ." He paused. "Next day that dog was found dead in its stall. It died in its sleep, the papers said."

"Oh well—" the M.E. started to say.

"I know," said Hoff. "Very coincidental. I thought so too. You don't think I stopped there? I tried a racehorse next. I marked an X on the picture of Razzle-Dazzle the day before the Belmont Stakes. . . . You know what happened to him in that race."

I should have known what happened to him. I had had ten bucks on his nose and when he fell and broke his leg in the home stretch, I all but cried. They'd shot him, of course.

The M.E. looked at me and we frowned at each other.

"I didn't stop there," said Hoff. "Accidents will happen, I said to myself. I've got to try it on something that has very small chance of dying. There was a picture of Wilbert Althouse in the paper. Of all the men in the world, I said, this one would be a real test. A multi-millionaire, surrounded by guards with no chance of accident, no worry, in apparent good health. I drew an X on his picture. And he dropped dead last night."

NOBODY said anything. I cleared my throat. "That's why I came down," he said. "I killed that man as sure as I'm sitting here. I'm not mad, and you know it. There couldn't be coincidences like that."

"Well now," said the M.E. kindly, "I think there could. The chances are small, but it just could happen. You go home and take that pencil of yours and draw it on something a little more substantial than a human being. Draw an X on a battleship and see what happens. I think that will prove to you that your pencil is a hoax."

"The doc is right," I said. "I couldn't take you in on a charge as preposterous as that. You may have X-ed Althouse, but he'd have dropped dead anyhow. Go home and X the Empire State Building and see if it falls."

Hoff looked relieved. "You really don't think it was my fault?"

I shook my head.

"Absolutely not," I said. "And I don't think you're goofy either. Just a series of coincidences. I'd be believing the damned thing myself after something like that. Go home and forget about it. Take my advice

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and pawn the darn thing and get your ten bucks out of it."

"All right," he said. "Thanks a lot." And he left. . . .

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"WAIT a minute," I told Captain McGrail. "I've got to take a good deep breath. Something tells me that this is going to top the Wizard of Oz. Boy, when it comes to fairy tales, you can really wave the wand."

"You think I'm kidding?" McGrail said gruffly.

"Oh, no," I said. "It's the gospel truth."

"It is," said Captain McGrail. "I can get you the witnesses."

"Nix," I said. "You've got a swell imagination, flatfoot, that's all I've got to say. Have another lollypop."

"All right." He took one and went on talking between licks.

•

I DIDN'T hear a word from the guy next day and I was sitting in the office at Centre Street that night when the flash came over the air that the zeppelin K-3 had burned and crashed down at Cleveland and that all hell had broken loose. A couple of the squad boys were sitting there with me when the bulletin was announced and we were horrified. Two minutes later, there were some details and the more we heard, the worse we felt. It was a rotten thing to happen and we all sat there, awed and shocked.

It was then the telephone rang and I picked it up, startled by it and snarled a hello and it was Peter Hoff again. "Captain McGrail!" he panted. His voice sounded awful. "My God, Captain, I did it! I wrecked it! The airship—the K-3—"

"You what?" I said. "Who is this?"

"This is Hoff!" he panted. "I was there yesterday. About the pencil of Death. You remember. I told you. I told you about Althouse. You told me to try it on something substantial. I X-ed the K-3. There was a photo in the papers this morning. I X-ed it and she's crashed! I just heard it on the radio. It's awful—"

"Get out of my hair!" I roared, angry at a guy being a dope at a time like that. "You're crazy!" And I slammed down the phone.

. . . But he didn't quit. Peter Hoff was a conscientious guy. He arrived in my office bright and early the next morning. Patterson, a first-grade dick, was talking with me about the Morelli case when Hoff knocked at the door and came in.

This Morelli case was open and shut. Nick Morelli had stuck up a jewelry store a couple of days before; his partner'd gotten away. In the stickup, a clerk had been shot to death. It was open and shut because another clerk named George Blake had been held up and had lived to tell the tale. He not only identified Morelli but he was certain he could identify the other heister when, as, and if we nabbed the guy.

Patterson and I had been discussing Morelli's chances. "They're nil," Patterson said. "He'll fry. Blake's testimony will burn him and no mistake. But I'll say this for the rat. He hasn't beefed on his pal. We gave him the works and he wouldn't talk. Maybe there is honor among thieves."

That was a good one.

"Baloney," I said. "When a jury finds Morelli guilty of murder in the first, and a judge sentences him to the chair and says may God have mercy on your soul, Morelli will sing his head off. And that's a prophecy."

IT WAS just then that Hoff knocked and came in before I could answer. I stood up and I felt a little mad. "Now listen," I said, "I've had enough of this stuff and I don't want any more. At first I thought you meant all right but when you made that call last night just after that ship crashed—that was poor taste, Hoff. Damned poor taste."

"What would you have me do?" he whispered, looking haggard. "It was the truth. You yourself told me to X something different than a man—you said the

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Empire State Building, that doctor said a battleship. I saw the dirigible in the paper and X-ed that. I swear I did. Look. Here's the identical photo and here's the X. And look what happened!"

He handed me a paper and there was a picture of the airship on the front page. Across the airship was a sort of stencil mark, a big X as though he had cut the X into the picture with a sharp knife.

"It's awful," Hoff groaned. "I feel rotten."

He looked rotten. He was haggard. He had a thousand little lines in his face that he hadn't had before. His skin was so gray it didn't even look real.

Patterson looked curious. "What is all this?"

"This guy," I said, "has a magic pencil that knocks things and people cold just by drawing an X on a picture. . . ." And I told him the whole story.

Patterson laughed. "Boy," he said, "I wish it was true. I'd sure like to try it out on Morelli. It would save a trial and a lot of money."

"But don't you see?" Hoff cried. "You can't try it out without destroying somebody or something. It kills. It destroys. I want to prove to you that I'm right, that it does what I say, that I'm sane. But to do that, it would kill and destroy."

Patterson looked unimpressed. He grinned and said, "Well, son, I wouldn't worry much about Morelli. He killed a man in cold blood and he'll burn in the chair for it sooner or later. He'd be the one to try it on."

"Listen," I said, "I've heard about this pencil but I've never seen it yet."

Hoff surprised me by saying, "I brought it with me today. I knew you wouldn't believe me, so I brought it."

He handed it to me. It was quite a thing with a sharp steel point and the fancy Persian writing on the golden band. I looked it over and I had a funny kind of feeling. It did look queer and there was something odd about it, just holding it that way. You felt you had the power of death right in your hand. But it was strictly flubdub of course. I put it down and looked at Patterson and said, "What am I going to do with this guy, Pat?"

Patterson laughed. "Why," he said, "it isn't a bad gag at all, matter of fact. I wished the thing worked. We could get rid of a lot of rats if it did. Why don't you give the thing a try?"

I stared at him. "Are you serious?"

"Why not?" he said. "Hoff believes in it. We don't. Let's try it out."

"I wish you could," Hoff said fervently. "But to try it out means that you condemn a living man. For I warn you, that pencil's mark will snuff the life out of the man you chose. If you chose anyone, don't do it foolishly, the way I did. Choose some one who might deserve to die—"

PATTERSON began to enjoy the idea. "We'll choose Nick Morelli, Captain, and I hope it does work. What do we need, a photo? All right, I'll run up to the rogue's gallery and get a shot of him. Be right back."

In five minutes Patterson came back with a picture of Nick Morelli. Morelli had a flat face with squinty eyes and you know how those police photos are. Patterson looked as if he was enjoying the whole business and I felt kind of silly, as though we were taking advantage of a serious-minded guy who happened to be cracked on a bunch of coincidences.

"I'll not do it," Hoff declared, his face still that funny gray hue which comes from shock and fatigue and worry. "I'll not be the man's executioner. If you're going to try it, one of you will have to do it."

"What do you do?" I asked, playing with the cloisonné pencil in my hands.

"Just draw an X on the face," he said, turning away.

I reached over and took him by the jaw with my right hand and turned him around. "Listen, Hoff," I said, "don't take is so seriously. We're only doing this to show you that you're screwy."

But I felt queer.

"Give it to me." Patterson grinned. "I'll do it." He took the scriber and he

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marked a big X right on Morelli's face. It scratched through the emulsion on the print. Then he handed the scriber to Hoff and we called it a day.

"He'll be dead in the morning," Hoff whispered.

"Sure," said Patterson, still laughing. "You give us a buzz around eight and we'll tell you how it happened."

So Hoff left, and after a while Patterson and I got a call and had to go uptown and we forgot all about it. That was the same afternoon I found gray paint on the steering wheel of the car and on my hand and couldn't figure out where it had come from.

But neither Patterson nor I were laughing much the next morning at eight A.M. when we had a call from the Tombs and heard that Nick Morelli had done a Dutch by swallowing a couple of cyanide of potassium tablets during the night.

•

"TIME out," I said. "We're two down on the lollypops and besides I don't believe a damn word you're saying."

Captain McGrail sat back and sighed wearily. "There's the younger generation for you. No respect for their elders. Practically calling me a liar. It's God's truth, you agnostic. It really happened, just like I'm telling it."

"Sure," I said, "and ever since then you've been using the pencil to wipe out anybody who's got a better job than you have. That's how you got to be a captain in homicide, on the death of guys ahead of you."

He glared at me.

"Listen to the young imp," Captain McGrail said. "If you'd keep your trap closed for a few minutes more and hear the rest of the story—hand me another lollypop."

"What flavor?"

"Lemon."

"Here," I said.

"That's not lemon," he said.

"That's raspberry," I said, "and no less than you deserve. Go on with the story."

IT WAS a fact (Captain McGrail continued), that Nick Morelli was dead the next morning. The chief M.E. came over to h.q. a little later and he said that it was his guess that Morelli had died around eleven o'clock the night before. That it was a suicide, there was no doubt. Cyanide of potassium in the mouth, in the belly. And a box with several extras right in his hand.

"How'd he get them?" I asked. "He was searched before he went in there to wait trial?"

"He got them," said the M.E. "How do crooks get guns in stir? Don't be silly, Captain."

"Listen," I said, "I happen to know that that guy was clean when he was snapped into his cell. I also happen to know that we've got honest guards over there and that they didn't give him the stuff. Did his lawyer see him yesterday?"

"No," said the M.E. "I asked all about that. The only one who came to see him was his mother."

"His mother?" I roared.

"Yes," said the M.E. "The guard said his mother came to see him. A little gray-haired woman, all kind of stooped over with grief. She only stayed a few minutes."

"By glory!" I raved. "Morelli hasn't got a mother! She died a couple of years ago! Patterson found that out. That dame was a plant and that dame—whoever she was—slipped him the cyanide. And between you and me, Morelli didn't commit suicide. He was no sap. He had a chance to turn state's evidence and save his neck if he had to! Remember this. That guy could have gone through the trial and if at the end of the trial he was found guilty, he could have switched his plea, turned state's evidence, named the other man in that stickup and taken a life term. After all, it was the other guy really did the shooting. Morelli was only accessory before the fact!"

"My word!" said the M.E. "Then we're going to look pretty silly to the newspapers. We've had a murder of one of our prisoners on our own home grounds!"

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"But," said Patterson who had just come in, "the Persian pencil worked. Didn't it, Captain? Hoff said it would. We X-ed the photo of Morelli and this morning he's dead. It worked!"

"That again?" said the M.E. "Another coincidence!"

"I don't think it's a coincidence," I said, and I did a lot of quick thinking. "Doc, you come down with me. I want to give you a specimen and I want you to test it and tell me what it is."

The M.E. and I went downstairs and I found my prowl car and I had him take some of the gray stuff off the wheel. It wasn't on my hands any more, but it was still on the wheel. He took it and he went to his lab and did his testing and an hour later, he came back to my office and he said, "Greasepaint."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Why," he said, "it's nothing more than greasepaint. Theatrical greasepaint. It's gray, the kind they use for old age or fatigue or shock or fear. Nothing more."

"Fine," I said. "Now we're getting some place."

At eleven o'clock the telephone rang and it was Hoff. He said, "Well, Captain, did the scriber work?"

"It worked," I said. "Morelli took poison last night in his cell. But I still don't believe in it. Bring it down here. I'm really going to give it a test."

"I told you it would kill him," Hoff said sadly. "I'll be down in a little while."

AFTER I hung up, I told Patterson to go uptown and bring back the witness in that Morelli stickup, George Blake, the clerk who had got out of the fracas alive. Patterson said he'd make it snappy and he left.

"Look here," said the M.E., "you don't really believe all that nonsense about this pencil really being able to mark a man for death? Althouse and the K-3 and Morelli?"

"Doc," I said, "I only believe this. Hoff told us he had marked Althouse. But that was after Althouse was already dead so we don't know whether it was really done before or not. He told us he X-ed the K-3, but he told us after the crash and not before. So we can let that one go too. But on the Morelli case, he X-ed the photo here *before* Morelli died, and to me, that means business. I haven't the slightest doubt that the pencil is really implicated. But I'm going to show you something. I'm going to show you that the Persian scriber really works. I'm going to show you it marks a man in fact." And then I called up the police photographer and gave him instructions.

Peter Hoff arrived at my office with the Persian scriber an hour later. He came in and I stalled around and talked with him a hell of a long time until finally the police photog knocked on the door and came in. He grinned and said, "Quick work, eh, Cap? And a nice little job it was too, considering you didn't give me much warning. By the way, Patterson is back."

"Tell him to come in five minutes from now," I said.

After the photog had gone, Hoff resumed, "Captain, I want you to keep this scriber. It may all be foolishness, but I believe it does work and I don't want to own it. I don't want it in my hands. The thing has the power of death and it's not right for one man to hold that power. I might lose my mind and go wild with that scriber and murder a lot of innocent people. So please take it."

I took it and held it and stared at it. "Hoff," I said, "I'm going to tell you something that will surprise you. I think perhaps that this pencil has got one more death in it. I'm going to try it out once more and then put it away forever."

"Not again!" he said. "Don't try it any more. Some poor devil will die if you do. Haven't you had enough?" His voice was a tormented wail.

"True," I said. "But it's got to be done. I've got to do it once more to be sure of it and then I'll see that it's put in a safe place forever." I opened the envelope the photog had handed me and I took out a picture.

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It was a closeup of a man entering police headquarters at Centre Street—the building we were sitting in; the very entrance, in fact, beneath the windows of my office. I put the photograph on my desk, and I said, "I'm going to X this man, Hoff, and we'll see if it works." And I took the scriber and made a great huge X in the emulsion of the photograph, right across the body of the subject of the picture. Then I handed it to him.

Hoff stared at it. "Why, that's—that's me—" he faltered. "That's a picture of me—when I was coming in a little while ago—"

"That's right," I said. "If it can kill Althouse, if it can burn the K-3, if it can make Morelli die of cyanide, surely it can kill you too."

Hoff said, sort of breathlessly, "Captain—you—you should not have done that—"

"Oh, come on," I said. "You were all gray and haggard yesterday when we did it to someone else. When I do it to you, you get all pink and say that I shouldn't have done it. You don't sound as if you mean it. You don't even sound as if you believed the scriber could have the power of death any more."

"Captain—" Hoff began, bewildered.

THEN Patterson opened the door and walked in with the clerk George Blake in tow behind him. Blake and Hoff stared at one another. And Blake suddenly cried, "That him! That's the other man! That's the one that did the shooting—"

"Wait a minute," Hoff said quietly. He held up his hand and Blake shut up. Hoff turned to me and he smiled sadly. "So you were on all the time, eh?"

"Not all the time," I said. "It was good while it lasted. But I got some of your greasepaint on my hand yesterday. You used to be an actor, eh? You never happened to take the part of an old lady before, did you? A Mrs. Morelli?"

Hoff smiled. "There's no use beating about the bush, Captain. I know I'm sunk. This guy"—he flipped a hand at Blake—"would fry me before a jury. The jig is up. As a matter of fact, that was touch and go. Playing Morelli's mother, I mean.

"But it was my only chance to get rid of him. If he had gone through the trial, he would have named me sure as shooting. I had to get him quiet and it was the only way. . . ." He stared at Blake. "I'd have reached this witness sooner or later."

"Listen," I said, "Morelli was no fool. How did you get him to swallow cyanide and do a Dutch act?"

Hoff shrugged. "He was ready to believe that I'd arranged a break for him. He believed it even more when I took the risk of going to see him, decked out like that. When I gave him the cyanide, I told him it was nux vomica and that it would make him sick to his stomach and that the cops would move him to the hospital ward and that I had arranged for an escape there with one of the guards. I had quite a little story for him and he fell for it. He took the tablets."

"And died," I said.

"Oh, well," said Hoff, "you can't live forever." He said it pleasantly and he was smiling, and he put his hand in his pocket and there was a shot. He slumped forward still smiling. He'd had a rod in his coat and he'd turned it onto himself without even taking it out of the coat pocket.

And even when Hoff was falling to the floor, Patterson was standing beside me and Patterson saw the Persian scriber lying on my desk, and saw the photo of Hoff there too, with the big X across it.

"For the love of God," Patterson whispered, seeing the X.

He gulped and met my eyes and I nodded quietly and said, "Yes, Pat, yes, for the love of God. . . ."

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CAPTAIN McGRAIL stared at me. "Well," he said, "that's the story. Why don't you say something?"

"What I'm trying to say," I replied, "is this: Did you ever X another picture with that pencil?"

"Of course not," he said. "It might real-

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ly work. After all, it worked for Morelli and for Hoff, didn't it? It might really have the power of death. If you want to try it out sometime, bring a photo of yourself down here and we'll X it and see what happens."

"I've got half a mind to do that," I said. "The police department is getting too superstitious."

I leaned forward and put out my hand to pick up the pencil—and then I didn't for some reason or other. When I looked up, Captain McGrail was grinning at me.

"You do it," he said. "There wouldn't be much of a loss to the fourth estate."

"But there's one thing I don't understand," I said.

"Hmm. That doesn't surprise me. What is it?"

I said, "Why did Hoff bother with all this hocus-pocus about the Persian scriber in the first place? That's why I know you're lying. He could have assumed the role of Mrs. Morelli and bumped off Nick Morelli to cover himself without all this malarkey about X-ing a photograph for the superstitious benefit of a dim-witted homicide captain. Why did he get in touch with you in the first place? Why did he take the risk? What had he to gain from the Persian scriber gag?"

"His life," said Captain McGrail. "I thought I covered that point, but I guess I didn't. You see, we had that witness, George Blake under cover. We had him tucked safely away in a hotel and we had a guard on him. We weren't taking any chances on the guy who got away in the heist coming back and polishing off the only man in the world who could ever identify him. So Hoff *had* to take the chance.

"And he had to take the chance in a hurry. He pulled that gag to get into my confidence and to try to find out where George Blake was being herded. He wanted to get us feeling sorry for him and he was listening all he could. He'd have worked us into talking in front of him and he'd have found out where Blake was sooner or later, maybe by telling us that he had X-ed a photo of Blake—or some such stall. He wanted to get Blake before Blake got him."

"Baloney," I said. "Why the hurry? You wouldn't have held Blake incommunicado forever. Once Morelli was dead, you would have had to let Blake go free, and Hoff could have reached him and killed him then, without all this other risk."

I thought I had him there. But he merely gave me a long, pitying look and wagged his head patiently as if he were having trouble with a small boy.

"Wrong," said Captain McGrail. "It developed that there was a pair of pictures of Mr. Hoff in the Rogue's Gallery under his real name Peter Hoffman. He'd been in stir for highway robbery before. We had Blake going through the files looking at the photos and Hoff knew it. He knew that soon Blake would came to his—Hoff's—picture, and identify it. That's why he took the risk and tried to find out where Blake was before Blake saw the photo. The game would have been up then. It was the only thing to do.

"And I think it was a clever thing. If I hadn't touched his face and got that grease paint on my hand, I think the guy would have pulled his trick right. He would learn where Blake was, bumped Blake, and got away clean on both Blake's murder and the stickup killing too."

"Hmm," I said. "I'd still like to X my own photo just to show you up for a faker."

"Stop being brave," said Captain McGrail, "and hand me another lollypop. You'd be scared green if I X-ed your photo."

"Nuts. What flavor?"

"Chocolate," he said. "How about you?"

"Personally," I said, giving him a long look, "Personally, *I'll* take vanilla. . . ."

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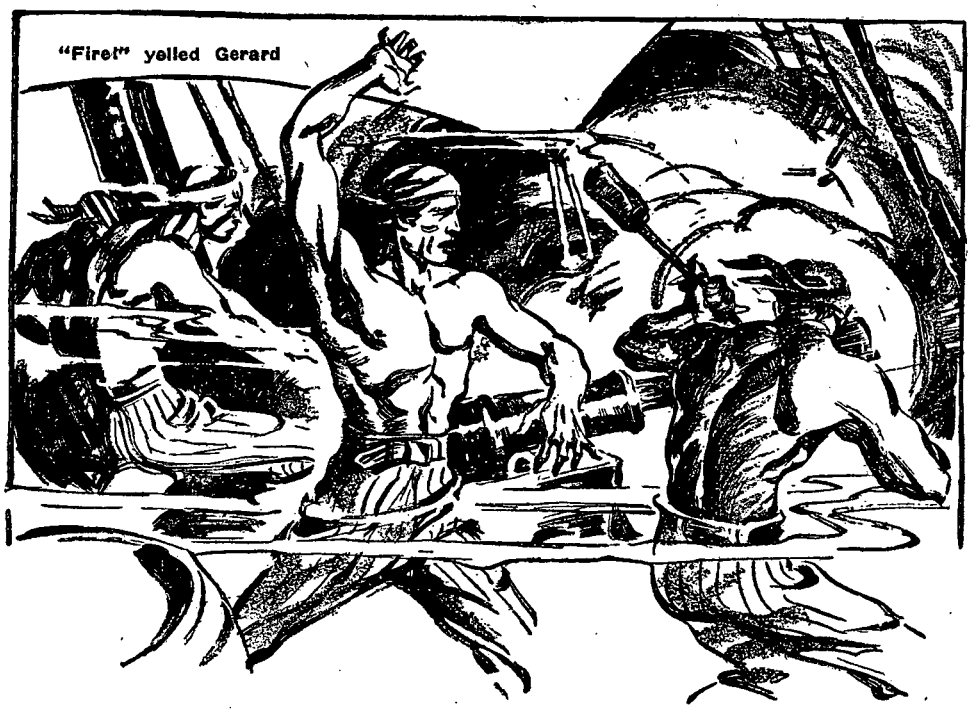

Beat to Quarters

By C. S. FORESTER

CAPTAIN HORATIO HORNBLOWER has brought H. M. S. Frigate *Lydia* from England to the Gulf of Fonseca, a seven months' voyage, without touching at a single port. To arrive at that practically unknown spot on the Pacific coast of Spanish America has required amazing seamanship, as Hornblower's officers realize; yet Hornblower himself is unimpressed. The things he *can* do leave him indifferent. Seriously concerned about the welfare of his ship and crew, by nature a warm-hearted and companionable man—still Hornblower cannot permit himself to confide in his officers, who idolize him; he must, he believes, appear silent, emotionless, confident. Because of his compelling sense of discipline, Hornblower has not revealed the Admiralty orders even to his sailing master, Bush—orders to assist one Don Julian Alvarado in a revolution against Spain. Such a move will incalculably benefit His Britanic Majesty's trade.

HORNBLOWER finds himself allied with a cruel and ruthless madman, for Don Julian now calls himself El Supremo and believes that by lineage he is divine. The *Lydia* discharges its cargo of arms under constant threat of the arrival of the *Natividad,* the one Spanish warship in these waters. When the *Natividad* puts in an appearance Hornblower is ready, his carefully laid plans are executed with precision; and the 36-gun frigate captures the 52-gun two-decker without losing a man, a feat without precedent in the long annals of British naval history. The victory leaves Hornblower lord of the South Sea. The capture of a Spanish treasure galleon would at one stroke make him a wealthy man and his wife Maria a great lady—although he can not imagine Maria, snatched from her middle-class lodgings, playing the part with any grace.

BUT visions of prize money, even on the *Natividad,* vanish when El Supremo orders his army aboard the two vessels for an attack on Nicaragua and places his vice admiral, Don Cristobal de Crespo, in command of the *Natividad.* Disembarking the

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army, the two ships part company. A messenger arrives with news that Britain has joined Spain in an alliance against Bonaparte, and orders for Hornblower to return to England. Complicating matters is a request that he pick up Lady Barbara Wellesley in Panama for the return voyage. First, however, Hornblower must eliminate the *Natividad's* threat to the Spanish treasure galleons. He resents Lady Barbara's presence aboard ship but realizes the Wellesley name can be of immense assistance to a young captain with as little influence as he. She soon wins his grudging admiration for her charm and good-humored acceptance of life on the *Lydia* . . .

CHAPTER XIII

MEETING THE "NATIVIDAD"

THE long volcanic coast line slid past them day after day. Every day brought its eternal panorama of blue sea and blue sky, of slaty-pink volcanic peaks and a fringing coast line of vivid green. With decks cleared for action and every man at his post they ran once more into the Gulf of Fonseca and sailed round the island of Manguera in search of the *Natividad*, but they did not find her.

They saw no sign of life on the shores of the bay, either. Someone fired a musket at the ship from the cliffs of Manguera—the spent bullet thudded into the main-chains—but they did not see the man who fired it.

Bush steered the *Lydia* out of the gulf again and northeastward in his search for the *Natividad*.

The *Natividad* was not to be found in the roadstead of La Libertad, nor in any of the little ports farther along.

There was much smoke to be seen at Champerico, and Hornblower, training his glass upon it, could see that for once it was not volcanic. Champerico was in flames, so that presumably El Supremo's men had come there spreading enlightenment, but there was no sign of the *Natividad*.

Storms awaited them in the Gulf of Tehuantepec, for that corner of the Pacific is always stormy, lashed by the wind which blows hither from the Gulf of Mexico through a gap in the sierras. Hornblower was made aware of the change by an increase in the motion of the ship. She was rising and swooping more violently than usual and a gusty wind was heeling her sharply over.

It was just eight bells, and the watch was being called; he could hear the bellowings of the master's mates—"Show a leg! Show a leg! Lash up and stow! Lash up and stow!"—as he ran up to the quarter-deck. The sky was still blue overhead and the sun was hot, but the sea was grey, now, and running high, and the *Lydia* was beginning to labor under her press of sail.

"I was just sending down to you, sir, for permission to shorten sail," said Bush.

Hornblower glanced up at the canvas, then at the clouds towards the coast.

"Yes. Get the courses and t'gallants off her," he said.

THE *Lydia* plunged heavily as he spoke, and then rose again, laboring, the water creaming under her bows. The whole ship was alive with the creaking of timber and the harping of the rigging. Under shortened sail she rode more easily, but the wind on her beam was growing stronger, and she was bowing down to it as she crashed over the waves. Looking round, Hornblower saw Lady Barbara standing with one hand on the taffrail.

The wind was whipping her skirts about her, and with her other hand she was trying to restrain the curls that streamed round her head. Her cheeks were pink under their tan, and her eyes sparkled.

"You ought to be below, Lady Barbara," he said.

"Oh, no, Captain. This is too delicious after the heat we have been enduring."

A shower of spray came rattling over the bulwarks and wetted them both.

"It is your health, ma'am, about which I am anxious."

"If salt water was harmful sailors would die young."

Her cheeks were as bright as if she had been using cosmetics. Hornblower could refuse her nothing, even though he bitterly

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remembered how last evening she had sat in the shadow of the mizzen rigging talking so animatedly to Gerard that no one else had been able to profit by her society.

"Then you may stay on deck, ma'am, since you wish it, unless this gale increases—and I fancy it will."

"Thank you, Captain," she replied.

There was a look in her eye which seemed to indicate that the question as to what would happen if the gale increased was not nearly as decided as the captain appeared to think—but like her great brother she crossed no bridges until she came to them.

Hornblower turned away; he would clearly have liked to have stayed there talking, with the spray pattering about them, but his duty was with his ship. As he reached the wheel there came a hail from the masthead.

"Sail ho! Deck, there, a sail right ahead. Looks like *Natividad,* sir."

Hornblower gazed up. The lookout was clinging to his perch, being swung round and round in dizzy circles as the ship pitched and swooped over the waves.

"Up you go, Knyvett," he snapped to the midshipman beside him. "Take a glass with you and tell me what you can see." He knew that he himself would be of no use as a lookout in that wild weather—he was ashamed of it, but he had to admit it to himself. Soon Knyvett's boyish voice came calling down to him through the gale.

"She's the *Natividad,* sir. I can see the cut of her tops'ls."

"How's she heading?"

"On the starboard tack, sir, same course as us. Her masts are in one line. Now she's altering course, sir. She's wearing round. She must have seen us, sir. Now she's on the port tack, sir, heading up to wind'ard of us, close-hauled, sir."

"Oh, is she," said Hornblower to himself, grimly. It was an unusual experience to have a Spanish ship face about and challenge action—but he remembered that she was a Spanish ship no longer. He would not allow her to get the weather gage of him, come what might.

"Man the braces, there!" he shouted, and then to the man at the wheel, "Port your helm. And mark ye, fellow, keep her as near the wind as she'll lie. Mr. Bush, beat to quarters, if you please, and clear for action."

As the drum rolled and the hands came pouring up he remembered the woman aft by the taffrail, and his stolid fatalism changed to anxiety.

"Your place is below, Lady Barbara," he said. "Take your maid with you. You must stay in the cockpit until the action is over—no, not the cockpit. Go to the cable tier."

"Captain—" she began, but Hornblower was not in the mood for argument—if indeed she had argument in mind.

"Mr. Clay!" he rasped. "Conduct her ladyship and her maid to the cable tier. See that she is safe before you leave her. Those are my *orders,* Mr. Clay. Ha—h'm."

A COWARDLY way out, perhaps, to throw on Clay the responsibility of seeing his orders carried out. He knew it, but he was angry with the woman because of the sick feeling of worry which she was occasioning him. She left him, nevertheless, with a smile and a wave of the hand, Clay trotting before her.

For several minutes the ship was a turmoil of industry as the men went through the well learned drill. The guns were run out, the decks sanded, the hoses rigged to the pumps, the fires extinguished, the bulkheads torn down.

The *Natividad* could be seen from the deck now, sailing on the opposite tack towards her, obviously clawing her hardest up to windward to get the weather gage.

Hornblower looked up at the sails to mark the least shiver.

"Steer small, blast you," he growled at the quartermaster.

The *Lydia* lay over before the gale, the waves crashing and hissing overside, the rigging playing a wild symphony. Last night she had been stealing peacefully over a calm and moonlit sea, and now here she

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was twelve hours later thrashing through a storm with a battle awaiting her.

The wind was undoubtedly increasing, a wilder puff almost took her aback, and she stagged and rolled until the helmsman allowed her to pay off.

"*Natividad* won't be able to open her lower deck ports!" gloated Bush beside him. Hornblower stared across the grey sea at the enemy. He saw a cloud of spray break over her bows.

"No," he said, heavily. He would not discuss the possibilities of the approaching action for fear lest he might be too talkative. "I'll trouble you, Mr. Bush, to have two reefs taken in those tops'ls."

On opposite tacks the ships were nearing each other along the sides of an obtuse angle. Look as closely as he would, he could not decide which ship would be to windward when they met at the apex.

"Mr. Gerard," he called down to the lieutenant in charge of the port side main deck battery. "See that the matches in your tubs are alight."

"Aye aye, sir."

With all this spray breaking aboard the flint lock trigger mechanism could not be relied upon until the guns grew hot and the old fashioned method of ignition might have to be used—in the tubs on deck were coils of slow-match to meet this emergency.

He stared across again at the *Natividad*. She, too, had reefed her topsails now, and was staggering along, close-hauled, under storm canvas. She was flying the blue flag with the yellow star; Hornblower glanced up overhead to where the dingy white ensign fluttered from the peak.

"She's opened fire, sir," said Bush beside him.

HORNBLOWER looked back at the *Natividad* just in time to see the last of a puff of smoke blown to shreds by the wind. The sound of the shot did not reach them, and where the ball went no one could say—the jet of water which it struck up somewhere was hidden in the tossing waves.

"Ha—h'm," said Hornblower.

It was bad policy, even with a well-drilled crew, to open fire at long range.

That first broadside, discharged from guns loaded carefully and at leisure, and aimed by crews with time to think, was too precious a thing to be dissipated lightly.

It should be saved up for use at the moment when it would do maximum harm, however great might be the strain of waiting inactive.

"We'll be passing mighty close, sir," said Bush.

"Ha—h'm," said Hornblower.

Still there was no means of telling which ship would hold the weather gage when they met. It appeared as if they would meet bow to bow in collision if both captains held rigidly to their present courses.

Hornblower had to exert all his will power to keep himself standing still and apparently unemotional as the tension increased.

Another puff of smoke from the *Natividad's* starboard bow, and this time they heard the sound of the shot as it passed overhead between the masts.

"Closer!" said Bush.

Another puff, and simultaneously a crash from the waist told where the shot had struck.

"Two men down at number four gun," said Bush, stooping to look forward under the gangway, and then, eyeing the distance between the two ships, "It's going to be a near thing."

It was a situation which Hornblower had visualized several times in his solitary walks on the quarterdeck. He took a last glance up at the weathervane, and at the topsails on the point of shivering as the ship tossed on the heaving sea.

"Stand by, Mr. Rayner. Fire as your guns bear," he called. Rayner was in command of the starboard side main deck battery. Then, from the corner of his mouth to the men at the wheel—"Put your helm a-weather. Catch her! Hold her so!"

The *Lydia* spun round and shot down the lee side of the *Natividad* and her star-

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board side guns went off almost simultaneously in a rolling crash that shook the ship to her keel.

The billow of smoke that enveloped her momentarily was blown away instantly by the gale.

Every shot crashed into the *Natividad's* side; the wind brought to their ears the screams of the wounded. So unexpected had the maneuver been that only one single shot was fired from the *Natividad,* and that did no damage—her lower deck ports on this, her lee side, were closed because of the high sea.

"Grand! Oh, grand!" said Bush. He sniffed at the bitter powder smoke eddying round him as if it had been sweet incense.

"Stand by to go about," rasped Hornblower.

A WELL-DRILLED crew, trained in months of storms under Bush's eagle eye, was ready at sheets and braces. The *Lydia* tacked about, turning like a machine, before the *Natividad* could offer any counter to this unexpected attack, and Gerard fired his battery into her helpless stern.

The ship's boys were cheering aimlessly in high piping trebles as they came running up from below with new charges for the guns.

On the starboard side the guns were already loaded; on the port side the guns' crews were thrusting wet swabs down the bore to extinguish any residual fragments of smouldering cartridge, ramming in the charges and shot, and heaving the guns up into firing position again.

Hornblower stared across the tossing water at the *Natividad.* He could see Crespo up on her poop; the fellow actually had the insolence to wave his hand to him, airily, while in the midst of bellowing orders at his unhandy crew.

The *Lydia* had wrung the utmost advantage out of her maneuver; she had fired her two broadsides at close range and had only received a single shot in reply, but now she had to pay for it. By her possession of the weather gage the *Natividad* could force close action for a space if resolutely handled.

Hornblower could just see her rudder from where he stood. He saw it kick over, and next moment the two-decker had swung round and was hurtling down upon them. Gerard stood in the midst of his battery gazing with narrowed eyes into the wind at the impressive bulk close overside.

His swarthy beauty was accentuated by the tenseness of the moment and the fierce concentration of his expression, but for once he was quite unconscious of his good looks.

"Cock your locks!" he ordered. "Take your aim! Fire!"

The roar of the broadside coincided exactly with that of the *Natividad's.*

The ship was enveloped in smoke, through which could be heard the rattling of splinters, the sound of cut rigging tumbling to the deck, and through it all Gerard's voice continuing with his drill—"Stop your vents!"

The quicker the touch holes of the muzzle loaders were plugged after firing the less would be the wear caused by the rush of the acid gases through them.

The guns' crews strained at the tackles as the heave of the ship bade fair to send them surging back against the ship's sides. They sponged and they rammed.

"Fire as you will, boys!" shouted Gerard. He was up on the hammock-netting now, gazing through the smoke wreaths at the *Natividad* rising and swooping alongside. The next broadside crashed out raggedly, and the next more raggedly still, as the more expert gun crews got off their shots more quickly than the others; soon the sound of firing was continuous, and the *Lydia* was constantly a-tremble. At intervals through the roar of her cannon came the thunderous crash of the *Natividad's* broadside—Crespo evidently could not trust his crew to fire independently with efficiency, and was working them to the word of command.

He was doing it well, too; at intervals, as the sea permitted, her lower deck ports were opening like clockwork and the big

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twenty-four pounders were vomiting flame and smoke.

"Hot work, this, sir," said Bush.

THE iron hail was sweeping the *Lydia's* decks. There were dead men piled round the masts, whither they had been hastily dragged so as not to encumber the guns' crews. Wounded men were being dragged along the deck and down the hatchways to where the horrors of the cockpit awaited them.

As Hornblower looked he saw a powder boy flung across the deck, dissolved into a red inhuman mass as a twenty-four pounder ball hit him.

"Ha—h'm," said Hornblower, but the sound was drowned in the roar of the quarterdeck carronade beside him.

It was hot work indeed, too hot. This five minutes of close firing was sufficient to convince him that the *Natividad's* guns were too well worked for the *Lydia* to have any chance against her overpowering strength broadside to broadside, despite the damage done in the first few minutes of the action.

He would have to win by craft if he was to win at all.

"Hands to the braces!" he yelled, his voice, high-pitched, cutting through the din of the guns. He stared narrow-eyed at the *Natividad* with the smoke pouring from her sides, he estimated the force of the wind and the speeds of the ships.

His mind was making calculations with delirious rapidity, keyed up by the excitement, as he began the new maneuver. Throwing the main topsail aback a trifle allowed the *Natividad* to shoot ahead without taking so much way off the *Lydia* as to make her unhandy, and then the next moment Hornblower tacked his ship about so that his waiting starboard battery was able to fire into the *Natividad's* stern.

The *Natividad* came up into the wind in the endeavor to follow her opponent round and keep broadside to broadside with her, but the frigate was far quicker in stays than the clumsy, stumpy two-decker.

Hornblower, watching his enemy with his keen gaze, tacked once more, instantly, and shot past the *Natividad's* stern on the opposite tack while Gerard, running from gun to gun, sent every shot crashing into the shattered timbers.

"Glorious! Damme! Damn my eyes! Damn my soul! Glorious!" spluttered Bush, thumping his right fist into his left hand and leaping up and down on the quarterdeck.

Hornblower had no attention to spare for Bush nor for Bush's good opinion, although later he was to remember hearing the words and find warm comfort in them.

As the ships diverged he shouted for the *Lydia* to go about again, but even as the sheets were handed and the helm put over the *Natividad* wore round to pass her to leeward. So much the better.

At the cost of a single exchange of broadsides he would be able to assail that vulnerable stern again, and if the *Natividad* attempted to circle, his was the handier ship and he could rely on getting in at least two effective shots to his opponent's one.

He watched the *Natividad* come foaming up; her bulwarks were riddled with shot and there was a trickle of blood from her scuppers.

He caught a glimpse of Crespo on the poop—he had hoped that he might have been killed in the last two broadsides, for that would mean, almost for certain, a slackening in the attack.

But her guns were run out ready, and on this, her weather side, her lower deck ports were open.

"For what we are about to receive—" said Bush repeating the hackneyed old blasphemy quoted in every ship awaiting a broadside.

SECONDS seemed as long as minutes as the two ships neared. They were passing within a dozen yards of each other. Bow overlapped bow, foremast passed foremast and then foremast passed mainmast. Rayner was looking aft, and as soon as he saw that the aftermost gun bore on the target he shouted the order to fire.

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The *Lydia* lifted to the recoil of the guns, the ears were split with the sound of the discharge, and then, even before the gale had time to blow away the smoke, came the *Natiniad's* crashing reply.

It seemed to Hornblower as if the heavens were falling round him.

The wind of a shot made him reel; he found at his feet a palpitating red mass which represented half the starboard side carronade's crew, and then with a thunderous crackling the mizzenmast gave way beside him. The weather mizzen rigging entangled him and flung him down into the blood on the deck, and while he struggled to free himself he felt the *Lydia* swing round as she paid off despite the efforts of the men at the wheel.

He got to his feet, dizzy and shaken, to find ruin all round him. The mizzenmast was gone, snapped off nine feet from the deck, taking the main top gallant mast with it, and masts and yards and sails and rigging trailed alongside and astern by the unparted shrouds. With the loss of the balancing pressure of the mizzen topsail the *Lydia* had been unable to keep her course on the wind and was now drifting helplessly dead before the gale. And at that very moment he saw the *Natividad* going about to cross his stern and repay with a crushing broadside the several unanswered salvoes to which earlier she had been forced to submit. His whole world seemed to be shattered. He gulped convulsively, with a sudden sick fear of defeat at the pit of his stomach.

CHAPTER XIV

THE SHIPS DISMASTED

BUT he knew, and he told himself, at the moment of his getting to his feet, that he must not delay an instant in making the *Lydia* ready for action again.

"Afterguard!" he roared—his voice sounding unnatural to himself as he spoke —"Mr. Clay! Benskin! Axes here! Cut that wreckage away!"

Clay came pounding aft at the head of a rush of men with axes and cutlasses. As they were chopping at the mizzen shrouds he noticed Bush sitting up on the deck with his face in his hands—apparently a falling block had struck him down, but there was no time to spare for Bush.

The *Natividad* was coming down remorselessly on them; he could see exultant figures on her deck waving their hats in triumph. To his strained senses it seemed to him that even through the din on board the *Lydia* he could hear the creaking of the *Natividad's* rigging and the rumble of her reloaded guns being run out.

She was steering to pass as close as possible. Hornblower saw her bowsprit go by, felt her reefed fore topsail loom over him, and then her broadside crashed out as gun after gun bore on the *Lydia's* stern. The wind caught the smoke and whipped it round Hornblower, blinding him.

He felt the deck leap as the shots struck home, heard a scream from Clay's party beside him, felt a splinter scream past his cheek, and then, just as annihilation seemed about to engulf him, the frightful succession of shots ended, the smoke was born away, the *Natividad* had gone by, and he was still alive and could look round him.

The slide of the aftermost carronade had been smashed, and one of Clay's men was lying screaming on the deck with the gun across his thighs and two or three of his mates striving futilely to prize it off him.

"Stop that!" screamed Hornblower—the necessity of having to give such an order sent his voice up to the same pitch as that of the miserable wretch in his agony— "Cut that bloody wreckage away! Mr. Clay, keep them at work!"

A cable's length away, over the grey topped waves the *Natividad* was slowly wearing round to return and deal a fresh blow at her helpless opponent. It was lucky that the *Natividad* was an unhandy ship, like all those stumpy fourth rates— it gave Hornblower more time between the broadsides to try and get the *Lydia* into a condition so that she could face her enemy again.

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"Foretop, there! Mr. Galbraith! Get the headsails in."

"Aye aye, sir."

The absence of the fore-topmast-staysail and storm jib would balance to some extent the loss of the mizzen topsail and driver.

He might, by juggling with the helm, get the *Lydia* to lie to the wind a trifle then, and hit back at his big opponent. But there was no hope of doing so while all this wreckage was trailing astern like a vast sea anchor.

Until that was cut away she could only lie helpless, dead before the wind, suffering her enemy's blows in silence. A glance showed him that the *Natividad* had worn round now, and was heading to cross their stern again.

"Hurry up!" he screamed to the axe men. "You, there, Holroyd, Tooms, get down into the mizzen chains."

He suddenly realized how high-pitched and hysterical his voice had become. At all costs he must preserve before Clay and the men his reputation for imperturbability.

He forced himself, convulsively, to look casually at the *Natividad* as she came plunging down on them again, wicked with menace; he made himself grin, and shrug his shoulders, and speak in his normal voice.

"Don't mind about her, my lads. One thing at a time. Cut this wreckage away first, and we'll give the Dagoes their bellyful after."

THE men hacked with renewed force at the tough tangles of cordage. Something gave way, and a new extravagant plunge on the part of the *Lydia,* as a huge wave lifted her stern, caused the wreckage to run out a little farther before catching again, this time on the mizzen stay, which, sweeping the deck, tumbled three men off their feet. Hornblower seized one of the fallen axes, and fell desperately on the rope as it sawed back and forth with the roll of the ship.

From the tail of his eye he saw the *Natividad* looming up, but he could spare no attention for her. For the moment she represented merely a tiresome interruption to his work, not a menace to his life.

Then once more he was engulfed in the smoke and din of the *Natividad's* broadside.

He felt the wind of shot round him. and heard the scream of splinters.

The cries of the man under the carronade ceased abruptly, and beneath his feet he could feel the crash as the shot struck home in the *Lydia's* vitals.

But he was mesmerized by the necessity of completing his task. The mizzen stay parted under his axe; he saw another rope draw up taut, and cut that as well—the pattern of the seams of the deck planking at that point caught his notice—felt another severed and flick past him, and then knew that the *Lydia* was free from the wreckage. Almost at his feet lay young Clay, sprawled upon the deck, but Clay had no head.

He noted that as an interesting phenomenon, like the pattern of the deck seams.

A sudden breaking wave drenched him with spray; he swept the water from his eyes and looked about him. Most of the men who had been on the quarterdeck with him were dead, marines, seamen, officers. Simmonds had what was left of the marines lined up against the taffrail, ready to reply with musketry to the *Natividad's* twenty-four pounders.

Bush was in the main top, and Hornblower suddenly realized that to him was due the cutting of the mizzen top mast stay which had finally freed the ship.

At the wheel stood the two quartermasters, rigid, unmoving, gazing straight ahead; they were not the same as the men who had stood there when the action began, but the iron discipline of the navy and its unbending routine had kept the wheel manned through the vicissitudes of the battle.

OUT on the starboard quarter the *Natividad* was wearing round again. Hornblower realized with a little thrill that this time he need not submit meekly

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to the punishment she was determined to administer.

It called for an effort to make himself work out the problem of how to work the ship round, but he forced his mind to concentrate on it, comparing the proportional leverages of the fore and main topsails, and visualizing in his mind the relative positions of the centre of the ship and the mainmast—luckily this latter was stepped a little aft.

"Man the braces, there!" he called. "Mr. Bush, we'll try and bring her to the wind."

"Aye aye, sir."

He looked back at the *Natividad,* plunging and heaving towards them.

"Hard-a-starboard!" he snapped at the quartermasters. "Stand to your guns, men."

The crew of the *Natividad,* looking along their guns, suddenly saw the *Lydia's* battered stern slowly turn from them. For a fleeting half minute, while the English frigate held her way, the quartermasters straining at her wheel were able to bring the wind abeam of her as the *Natividad* swept by.

"Fire!" yelled Gerard—his voice, too, was cracking with excitement.

The *Lydia* heaved again with the recoil of the guns, and the smoke billowed over her deck, and through the smoke came the iron hail of the *Natividad's* broadside.

"Give it her again, lads!" screamed Gerard. "There goes her foremast! Well done, lads."

The guns' crews cheered madly, even though their two hundred voices sounded feeble against the gale. In that sudden flurry of action the enemy had been hard hit.

Through the smoke Hornblower saw the *Natividad's* foremast shrouds suddenly slacken, tauten again, slacken once more, and then her whole foremast bowed forward; her main topmast whipped and then followed it, and the whole vanished over the side.

The *Natividad* turned, turned instantly up into the wind, while at the same time the *Lydia's* head fell off as she turned downward despite the efforts of the men at the wheel.

The gale screamed past Hornblower's ears as the strip of grey sea which divided the ships widened more and more.

One last gun went off on the main deck, and then the two ships lay pitching upon the turbulent sea, each unable to harm the other.

Hornblower wiped the spray slowly from his eyes again.

This battle was like some long drawn nightmare, where one situation of fantastic unreality merged into the next. He felt as if he were in a nightmare, too—he could think clearly, but only by compelling himself to do so, as though it was unnatural to him.

The gap between the ships had widened to a full half mile, and was widening further. Through his glass he could see the *Natividad's* forecastle black with men struggling with the wreck of the foremast. The ship which was first ready for action again would win. He snapped the glass shut and turned to face all the problems awaiting his immediate solution.

CHAPTER XV

REFITTING

THE Captain of the *Lydia* stood on his quarterdeck while his ship, hove to under main staysail and three-reefed main topsail, pitched and wallowed in the fantastic sea. It was raining now, with such violence that nothing could be seen a hundred yards away, and there were deluges of spray sweeping the deck, too, so that he and his clothes were as wet as if he had been swimming in the sea, but he was not aware of it.

Everyone was appealing to him for orders—first lieutenant, gunner, boatswain, carpenter, surgeon, purser. The ship had to be made fit to fight again, even though there was every doubt as to whether she would even live through the storm which shrieked round her.

It was the acting-surgeon who was appealing to him at the moment.

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"But what am I to *do,* sir?" he said pathetically, white faced, wringing his hands. This was Laurie, the purser's stewart who had been appointed acting-surgeon when Hankey the surgeon died. He had fifty wounded down in the grim, dark cockpit, maddened with pain, some with limbs torn off, and all of them begging for the assistance which he had no idea of how to give.

"What are you to *do,* sir?" mimicked Hornblower scornfully, beside himself with exasperation at this incompetence. "After two months in which to study your duties you have to ask what to do!"

Laurie only blenched a little more at this, and Hornblower had to make himself be a little helpful and put some heart in this lily-livered incompetent.

"See here, Laurie," he said, in more kindly fashion. "Nobody expects miracles of you. Do what you can. Those who are going to die you must make easy. You have my orders to reckon every man who has lost a limb as one of those. Give them laudanum—twenty-five drops a man, or more if that won't ease them. Pretend to bandage 'em. Tell 'em they're certain to get better and draw a pension for the next fifty years. As for the others, surely your mother wit can guide you. Bandage 'em until the bleeding stops. You have rags enough to bandage the whole ship's crew. Put splints on the broken bones. Don't move any man more than is necessary. Keep every man quiet. A tot of rum to every wounded man, and promise 'em another at eight bells if they lie still. I never knew a Jack yet who wouldn't go through hell fire for a tot of rum. Get below, man, and see to it."

"Aye aye, sir."

Laurie could only think of his own responsibility and duty; he scuttled away below without a thought for the hell-turned-loose on the main deck. Here one of the twelve pounders had come adrift, its breechings shot away by the *Nativi-dad's* last broadside.

With every roll of the ship it was rumbling back and forth across the deck, a ton and a half of insensate weight, threatening at any moment to burst through the ship's side.

Galbraith with twenty men trailing ropes, and fifty men carrying mats and hammocks, was trailing it cautiously from point to point in the hope of tying it or smothering it into helplessness.

As Hornblower watched them, a fresh heave of the ship canted it round and sent it thundering in a mad charge straight at them.

They parted wildly before it, and it charged through them, its trucks squealing like a forest of pigs, and brought up with a shattering crash against the mainmast.

"Now's your chance, lads! Jump to it!" yelled Hornblower.

GALBRAITH, running forward, risked limb and life to pass a rope's end through an eye tackle. Yet he had no sooner done it than a new movement of the ship swung the gun round and threatened to waste his effort.

"Hammocks, there!" shouted Hornblower. "Pile them quick! Mr. Galbraith, take a turn with that line round the mainmast. Whipple, put your rope through the breeching ring. Quick, man! Now take a turn!"

Hornblower had accomplished what Galbraith had failed to do—had correlated the efforts of the men in the nick of time so that now the gun was bound and helpless. There only remained the ticklish job of maneuvering it back to its gun port and securing it with fresh breechings.

Howell the carpenter was at his elbow now, waiting until he could spare a moment's attention from this business with the gun.

"Four feet an' more in the well, sir," said Howell, knuckling his forehead. "Nearer five, an' making fast as well as I could tell. Can I have some more men for the pumps, sir?"

"Not until that gun's in place," said Hornblower, grimly. "What damage have you found?"

"Seven shot holes, sir, below water line.

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There's no pluggin' of 'em, not with this sea runnin', sir."

"I know that," snapped Hornblower. "Where are they?"

"All of 'em for'rard, somehow, sir. One clean through the third frame timber, starboard side. Two more—"

"I'll have a sail fothered under the bottom as soon as there are enough men to spare. Your men at the pumps will have to continue pumping. Report to the first lieutenant's party with your mates now."

The first lieutenant and the boatswain were busily engaged upon the duty of erecting a jury mizzenmast. Already the boatswain had come ruefully to the captain with the information that half the spare spars secured between the gangways had been damaged by shot, but there was a main topsail yard left which would serve. But to sway up its fifty-five foot length into a vertical position was going to be a tricky business—hard enough in a smooth sea, dangerous and prolonged out here with the Pacific running mad.

In harbor an old ship—a sheer hulk—would be brought alongside, and would employ the two immense spars which constituted her sheers as a crane in which to lift the new mast vertically into the ship.

Here there was nothing of the sort available, and the problem of raising the spar might seem insoluble, but Bush and Harrison between them were tackling it with all the resource and energy the navy could display.

HAPPILY there was that stump of the old mizzenmast left—its nine feet of length relieved them of the tiresome complication of stepping the new mast, which they proposed instead merely to fish to the stump.

The after part of the ship was alive with working parties each intent on its own contribution to the work in hand.

With tackles and rollers the spar had been eased aft until its butt was solidly against the stump of the mizzenmast.

Harrison was now supervising the task of noosing shrouds to the new masthead; after that he would have to prepare the masthead to receive the cap and the trussel trees which the carpenter and his mates would now have to make.

In the mizzen chains on either side Harrison's mates were supervising the efforts of two other parties engaged upon attaching the other ends of the shrouds to the channels, where with dead eyes and lanyards the shrouds could be kept taut as the mast rose.

Bush was attending to the preparation of the jears and tackle at the mainmast which would help to accomplish a great part of the lift; the sailmaker and his mates were rousing out and adapting sails to fit the new mast, gaff, and yards.

Another party of men under the gunner was engaged on the difficult task of remounting the dismounted quarterdeck carronade, while Gerard was aloft with the topmen attending to the repair of the damage done to the standing and running rigging of the remaining masts. All this was in the rain, with the wind shrieking around them; and yet the rain and the wind seemed warm to the touch, so oppressively hot was it.

The half-naked seamen, slaving at their task, were running wet with sweat as well as with rainwater and spray. The ship was a nightmare of insane yet ordered activity.

A sudden flurry of rain heralded the arrival of a clear spell.

Braced upon the heaving deck Hornblower set his glass to his eye; the *Natividad* was visible again, hull down now, across the tossing grey flecked sea.

She was hove-to as well, looking queerly lopsided in her partially dismasted condition.

Hornblower's glass could discover no sign of any immediate replacement of the missing spars; he thought it extremely probable that there was nothing left in the ship to serve as jury masts.

In that case as soon as the *Lydia* could carry enough sail aft to enable her to beat to windward he would have the *Natividad*

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at his mercy—as long as the sea was not running high enough to make gunnery impossible.

He glowered round the horizon; at present there was no sign of the storm abating, and it was long past noon. With the coming of night he might lose the *Natividad* altogether, and nightfall would give his enemy a further respite in which to achieve repairs.

"How much longer, Mr. Harrison?" he rasped.

"Not long now, sir. Nearly ready, sir."

"You've had long enough and to spare for a simple piece of work like that. Keep the men moving, there."

"Aye aye, sir."

HORNBLOWER knew that the men were cursing him under their breath; he did not know they admired him as well, as men will admire a hard master despite themselves.

Now it was the cook come to report to him—the cook and his mates had been the only men in the ship who could be spared for the grisly work allotted to them.

"All ready, sir," he said.

Without a word Hornblower strode forward down the starboard side gangway, taking his prayer book from his pocket. The fourteen dead were there, shrouded in their hammocks, two to a grating, a roundshot sewn into the foot of each hammock. Hornblower blew a long blast upon his silver whistle, and activity ceased on board while he read, compromising between haste and solemnity, the office for the burial of the dead at sea.

"We therefore commit their bodies to the deep—"

The cook and his mates tilted each grating in turn, and the bodies fell with sullen splashes overside while Hornblower read the concluding words of the service. As soon as the last words were said he blew his whistle again and all the bustle and activity recommenced.

He grudged those few minutes taken from the work bitterly, but he knew that any unceremonious pitching overboard of the dead would be resented by his men, who set all the store by forms and ceremonies to be expected of the uneducated.

And now there was something else to plague him. Picking her way across the main deck below him came Lady Barbara, the little negress clinging to her skirts.

"My orders were for you to stay below, ma'am," he shouted to her. "This deck is no place for you."

Lady Barbara looked round the seething deck and then tilted her chin to answer him.

"I can see that without having it pointed out to me," she said, and then, softening her manner, "I have no intention of obstructing, Captain. I was going to shut myself in my cabin."

"Your cabin?"

Hornblower laughed. Four broadsides from the *Natividad* had blasted their way through that cabin. The idea of Lady Barbara shutting herself up there struck him as being intensely funny. He laughed again, and then again, before checking himself in hurried mistrust as an abyss of hysteria opened itself before him. He controlled himself.

"There is no cabin left for you, ma'am. I regret that the only course open to you is to go back whence you have come. There is no other place in the ship that can accommodate you at present."

Lady Barbara, looking up at him, thought of the cable tier she had just left. Pitch dark, with only room to sit hunched up on the slimy cable, rats squeaking and scampering over her legs; the ship pitching and rolling madly, and Hebe howling with fright beside her; the tremendous din of the guns, and the thunderous rumble of the gun trucks immediately over her head as the guns were run in and out; the tearing crash which had echoed through the ship when the mizzenmast fell; the ignorance of how the battle was progressing—at this very moment she was still unaware whether it had been lost or won or merely suspended; the stench of the bilge, the hunger and the thirst.

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The thought of going back there appalled her.

But she saw the captain's face, white with fatigue and strain under its tan, and she noted that laugh with its hysterical pitch, abruptly cut off, and the grim effort that had been made to speak to her reasonably.

The captain's coat was torn across the breast, and his white trousers were stained —with blood, she suddenly realized. She felt pity for him, then. She knew now that to speak to him of rats and stinks and baseless fears would be ridiculous.

"Very good, Captain," she said quietly, and turned to retrace her steps.

The little negress set up a howl, and was promptly shaken into silence as Lady Barbara dragged her along.

CHAPTER XVI

EVENING AND NIGHT

"READY now, sir," said Bush. The crew of the *Lydia* had worked marvellously. The guns were all secured now, and the main deck cleared of most of the traces of the fight. A sail stretched over the bottom of the ship had done much to check the inflow of water, so that now only twenty men were at work upon the pumps and the level in the well was measurably sinking.

The sailmaster had his new sails ready, the boatswain his rigging, the carpenter his accessories. Already Harrison had his men at the windlass, and the mast lay ready for hoisting.

Hornblower looked round him. All the mad effort put into the work to get it done speedily was wasted, for the gale still showed no signs of abating and with this present wind blowing it would be hopeless to try to beat over to the *Natividad*.

He had driven his men hard—overdriven them—to lose no time, and now it was obvious that they might have done it all at their leisure. But the work might as well be completed now. He ran his eye over the waiting groups of men; each knew their duty, and there was an officer at each strategic point to see that orders were carried out.

"Very good, Mr. Bush," he said.

"Hoist away, there!" yelled Bush to the windlass crew.

The windlass began to turn, the rope began to groan through the jears, and the mast rose, little by little, watched by every eye. The mad plunges of the ship threatened to ruin everything.

There was danger of the masthead escaping from the ropes that held it; there was danger of the butt slipping away from the stump of the mizzenmast against which it rested.

Everything had to be watched, every precaution taken, to see that neither of these possibilities developed. Bush watched the jears, while Gerard at the main masthead attended to the slings. Galbraith was in the mizzen chains on one side, Rayner on the other. Boatswain and carpenter stood with ropes and spars at the butt end of the mast, but it was the captain, leaning on the quarterdeck rail, whose duty it was to see that every part of the cumbrous machine did its work in its proper relation to the others. It was he whom the crew would blame for failure.

He knew it, too.

He watched the dizzy heave and pitch of the ship, and the masthead wavering in the slings, and he heard the butt end grinding upon the deck as it moved uneasily between the two spars lashed as buttresses against the stump of the mizzenmast.

It was an effort to think clearly, and he could only compel his mind to it by an exertion of all his will. He was sick and tired and nervous.

IT WAS of vital importance that the hands at the shrouds and backstays only took up as much slack as was won for them by the jears, and refrained from tightening up when a roll of the ship swung the mast over on their side a trifle.

Yet this was just what they persisted in doing, maddeningly, so obsessed were they

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with the necessity of keeping all taut to prevent the swaying mast from taking charge.

Twice the grip of the slings on the masthead was imperilled in this way, and Hornblower had to key himself up to his highest pitch for several seconds, watching the roll of the ship, so as to time precisely the next heave which would obviate the danger.

His voice was hoarse with shouting. His fists clenched.

Slowly the mast left the horizontal and swayed up towards the perpendicular. Hornblower's calculating eye, measuring stresses and reactions, saw that the crisis was now come—the moment when the jears could raise the masthead no more and the final lifting must be accomplished by the pull of the backstays aft.

The next few moments were tricky ones, because the masthead would now be deprived of the positive support of the slings. The jears had to be disconnected from the windlass and their work done by the backstays.

Two lengths of cable had to be passed round the sloping jury mast and the vertical stump, with gangs of men ready to tighten them, tourniquet fashion, with capstan bars as each gain was made. Yet in these first seconds the backstays were at a mechanical disadvantage and would certainly not bear the strain which would be imposed on them if the windlass were employed in an endeavor to drag the mast upright by brute force.

The motion of the ship must be utilized to help. Hornblower had to watch the motion carefully, calling to the men to wait as the ship rolled and plunged, and then, as the bow slowly emerged from the creaming sea and climbed steadily skywards, he had to set windlass men and tourniquet men and lanyard men all in action at once, and then check them all instantly as the bow began to sink again and full strain came onto the rigging.

Twice he managed it successfully, and then three times—although the third time an unexpected wave lifted the *Lydia's* stern at the wrong moment and nearly wrecked everything.

Then the fourth heave settled it all.

The mast was now so nearly vertical that shrouds and backstays were at a mechanical advantage, and everything could be hove taut regardless of the ship's motion. Shrouds and backstays could be set up now in normal fashion, the jury mast adequately fished to the stump—in fact all the difficult part of the work was completed.

Hornblower leaned against the rail, sick with weariness, wondering dully how these iron-framed men of his could find the strength to cheer as they put the finishing touches to their work.

He found Bush beside him—Bush had a rag round his head, bloodstained because of the cut in his forehead inflicted by the falling block.

"A magnificent piece of work, if I may say so, sir," he said.

Hornblower eyed him sharply, suspicious as ever of congratulation, knowing his own weakness so well. But Bush, surprisingly, seemed to mean in all sincerity what he said.

"Thank you," said Hornblower, grudgingly.

"Shall I send up the topmast and yards, sir?"

HORNBLOWER looked round the horizon once more. The gale was blowing as madly as ever, and only a grey smudge on the distant horizon marked where the *Natividad* was battling with it.

Hornblower could see that there was no chance of showing any more canvas at present, no chance of renewing the fight while the *Natividad* was still unprepared. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

He could imagine what would be said in service circles when he sent in his report to the Admiralty.

His statement that the weather was too bad to renew the action, after having received such a severe handling, would be received with pitying smiles and knowing wags of the head. It was a hackneyed

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excuse, like the uncharted rock which explained faulty navigation.

Cowardice, moral or even perhaps physical, would be the unspoken comment on every side—at ten thousand miles distance no one could judge of the strength of a storm.

He could divest himself of some of his responsibility by asking Bush his opinion, and requesting him to go through the formality of putting it in writing; but he turned irritably from the thought of displaying weakness before his inferior.

"No," he said, without expression. "We shall stay hove-to until the weather moderates."

There was a gleam of admiration in Bush's bloodshot eyes—Bush could well admire a captain who could make with such small debate a decision so nearly touching his professional reputation.

Hornblower noticed it, but his cursed temperament forbade him to interpret it correctly.

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush, warned by the scowl on his captain's forehead not to enlarge on the subject. But his affection for his captain compelled him to open a fresh one. "If that's the case, sir, why not take a rest? You look mortally tired, sir, indeed you do. Let me send and have a berth screened off for you in the wardroom."

Bush found his hand twitching—he had been about to commit the enormity of patting his captain's shoulder, and restrained himself just in time.

"Fiddlesticks!" snapped Hornblower. As if a captain of a frigate could publicly admit that he was tired!

And Hornblower could not trust himself to show any weakness at all—he always remembered how on his first commission his second-in-command had taken advantages of lapses on his part.

"It is rather you who need a rest," said Hornblower. "Dismiss the starboard watch, and go below and turn in. Have someone attend to that forehead of yours, first. With the enemy in sight I shall stay on deck."

AFTER that it was Polwheal who came to plague him—Hornblower wondered ineffectively whether he came of his own initiative or whether Bush sent him up.

"I've been to attend to the lady, sir," said Polwheal; Hornblower's tired mind was just beginning to grapple with the problem of what to do with Lady Barbara in a damaged ship cleared for action. "I've screened off a bit of the orlop for her, sir. The wounded's mostly quiet by now, sir. I slung a 'ammock for her—nipped into it like a bird, she did, sir. She's taken food, too, sir—what was left of that cold chicken an' a glass of wine. Not that she wanted to, sir, but I persuaded her, like."

"Very good, Polwheal," said Hornblower. It was an enormous relief to hear that one responsibility at least was lifted from his shoulders.

"An' now about you, sir," went on Polwheal. "I've got you up some dry clothes from your chest in your storeroom, sir—I'm afraid that last broadside spoilt everything in your cabin, sir. An' I've got your boat cloak, sir, all warm an' dry. Do you care to shift your clothes up here or down below, sir?"

Polwheal could take much for granted and could wheedle the rest.

Hornblower had anticipated dragging his weary form in his water logged clothes up and down the quarterdeck all through the night, his nervous irritation not permitting him to contemplate any other course.

Polwheal unearthed Lady Barbara's hammock chair from somewhere and lashed it to the rail and persuaded Hornblower to sit in it and consume a supper of biscuit and rum. Polwheal wrapped the boat cloak about him and airily took it for granted that he would continue to sit there, since his determination was fixed not to turn in while the enemy was still close at hand.

And marvellously, as he sat there, with the spray wetting his face and the ship leaping and rolling under him, his head drooped upon his breast and he slept. It

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was only a broken and fitful sleep, but astonishingly restorative.

He woke every few minutes.

Twice it was the sound of his own snores which roused him. At other times he woke with a start to see whether the weather was moderating; at other times still the thoughts which went running on through his mind despite his dozing called him out of his unconsciousness when they reached some fresh startling conclusion regarding what opinion England and his crew would hold of him after this battle.

SOON after midnight his sailor's instincts called him definitely into complete wakefulness. Something was happening to the weather. He scrambled stiffly to his feet. The ship was rolling more wildly than ever, but as he sniffed round him he knew that there was an improvement.

He walked across to the binnacle, and Bush loomed vastly out of the darkness beside him.

"Wind's shifting southerly an' moderating, sir," said Bush.

The shift of the wind was breaking up the long Pacific waves into steeper seas, as the *Lydia's* antics displayed well enough.

"Black as the Earl of Hell's riding boots, all the same, sir," grumbled Bush, peering into the darkness.

Somewhere, perhaps twenty miles from them, perhaps only two hundred yards, the *Natividad* was combating the same gale.

If the moon were to break through the scurrying clouds they might be at grips with her at any moment, yet while they were talking it was so dark that they could hardly make out the loom of the main topsail from the quarterdeck.

"She was going away to leeward much faster than us when we saw her last," said Bush meditatively.

"I happened to notice that myself," snapped Hornblower.

In this present darkness, however much the gale might moderate, there was nothing they could do. Hornblower could foresee, awaiting them, another of those long intervals of time with nothing to do and everything ready which punctuate the life of a naval officer and which were so liable to irritate him if he allowed them to.

He realized that here was another opportunity to show himself as an iron-nerved man whom no tension could disturb. He yawned elaborately.

"I think I shall go to sleep again," he said, speaking with the utmost unconcern. "See that the lookouts keep awake, if you please, Mr. Bush. And have me called as soon as it grows lighter."

"Aye aye, sir," said Bush, and Hornblower went back to his boat cloak and his hammock chair.

He lay there for the rest of the night, unsleeping, and yet staying rigidly still so that the quarterdeck officers might think him asleep and admire the steadiness of his nerves. His mind was busy on the task of guessing what Crespo might be planning in the *Natividad*.

The latter was so badly crippled that probably he would be able to make no effective repairs while at sea. It would be much to his advantage to make for the Gulf of Fonseca again.

There he could step a new foremast and send up a new main topmast.

If the *Lydia* tried to interfere with her there she could overwhelm her by her superior weight in those confined waters; and besides, she would have the assistance of shore boats and possibly even of shore batteries. Moreover he could land his wounded and refill the gaps in his crew caused by the recent action—even landsmen would be of use in a fight to a finish. Crespo was a man of sufficient flexibility of mind not to scorn a retreat if it were to his advantage.

The doubtful point was whether Crespo would dare to face El Supreme after an unsuccessful action.

That was the crux of the situation.

HORNBLOWER lay considering the matter, balancing his estimate of Crespo's character against what he knew of El Supremo.

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He remembered Crespo's glibness of tongue; that man would be able to convince even El Supremo that his return to his base with the *Lydia* undefeated was all part of a cunning plan for the more certain destruction of the enemy.

Certainly his best course would be to return, and probably that would be the course he would adopt, and that course implied an attempted evasion of the *Lydia*. In that case he would—Hornblower's mind began feverish calculations of the *Natividad's* present position and future course. In consequence of her bigger bulk, and her two decks, she would have made far more leeway during the night—she was far to leeward of him at nightfall, for that matter.

With the wind shifting and moderating as is was doing at present she would soon be able to make what sail her crippled condition would permit.

The wind would be nearly foul for a run to the Gulf of Fonseca. Making for the mainland would be dangerous in Crespo's opinion, for the *Lydia* could hem her in between sea and shore and compel her to fight.

Most likely he would reach far out to sea, clawing southward at the same time as much as he could, and make for the Gulf of Fonseca by a long detour out of sight of land.

In that case Hornblower must guess at what would be his position at dawn.

He plunged into further tortuous mental calculations.

Eight bells sounded; the watch was called; he heard Gerard come to take over the deck from Bush. The wind was dropping fast, although the sea showed no sign of moderating as yet.

The sky as he looked up at it was perceptibly lighter—here and there he could see stars between the clouds. Crespo would certainly be able to make sail now and attempt his escape.

It was time for Hornblower to come to a decision. He climbed out of the hammock chair and walked across to the wheel.

"We will make sail, if you please, Mr. Bush."

"Aye aye, sir."

Hornblower gave the course, and he knew as he gave it that it might be quite the wrong one. He might have completely miscalculated. Every yard that the *Lydia* was sailing now might be in a direction away from the *Natividad*. Crespo might at this very moment be heading past him to safety. He might never destroy the *Natividad* at all if she fortified herself in the Gulf of Fonseca. There would be some who would attribute his failure to incompetence, and there would be not a few who would call it cowardice.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

AN ARGOSY BLUE RIBBON STORY

Great events in history become the stuff of great writing. The Siege of Acre was the last battle in a struggle that lasted more than two centuries. It comes again to thrilling, pounding life in

RETURN TO GLORY

By ROBERT CARSE

Watch for it in Argosy soon

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LEGENDS OF THE LEGIONARIES

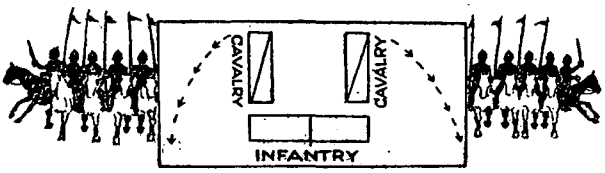
ORIGINS OF THE CUSTOMS AND SAYINGS OF THE FIGHTING-MEN : by W·A·WINDAS

•DRIVING ON LEFT SIDE OF ROAD•

Vehicular traffic of most nations is on the left side of the road. This custom had its origin in days when strangers approaching on highways might be enemies. If friends, hand greetings ensued. If enemies, they were in correct position for instant sword-play.

•GUARD-HOUSE LAWYER•

Army nickname for the habitual ne'er-do-well growler. Claiming vast knowledge of Military Law and eternally advising soldiers how to "beat the court martial" when they are charged with crime, he never seems able to "beat the rap" for himself.



•LIEUTENANT•

Originally this implied "In lieu of" a higher officer. He was sometimes called "Petty Captain" although his rank more nearly paralleled that of the modern major.

•WINGS• Common name for the flanks of armies. It originated in days when the flanks of the main body were protected by cavalry, columns perpendicular to the infantry line and extending rearward. If an enemy attacked the flanks the cavalry would face outward, and, executing a flapping movement, would drive him away.

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For Divers Reasons

By WILLIAM E. BARRETT

Author of "Rabbit Chaser," "A Gentleman of Letters," etc.

The saga of a young middleweight who took his beating on his feet

DAKOTA GRANEY moved around the training-camp ring with the effortless ease of a greyhound at play. Smokey Smith, his sparring partner, had slowed down to a shuffle and Dakota slowed with him. Suddenly the black man's right slashed out. Dakota rolled and he stopped playing. His left hook traveled a bare six inches but the Negro took it coming in, and went into the resin. Dakota grinned and looked down at the ringside. He always looked down when it was safe to.

This time Beth Cooper wasn't looking back at him. She was frowning at Smokey Smith who was taking the count with one eye cocked at Murray who was doing the counting. With the ten, Smokey got up. He shook his head and his white teeth flashed.

"Whoooie!" he said.

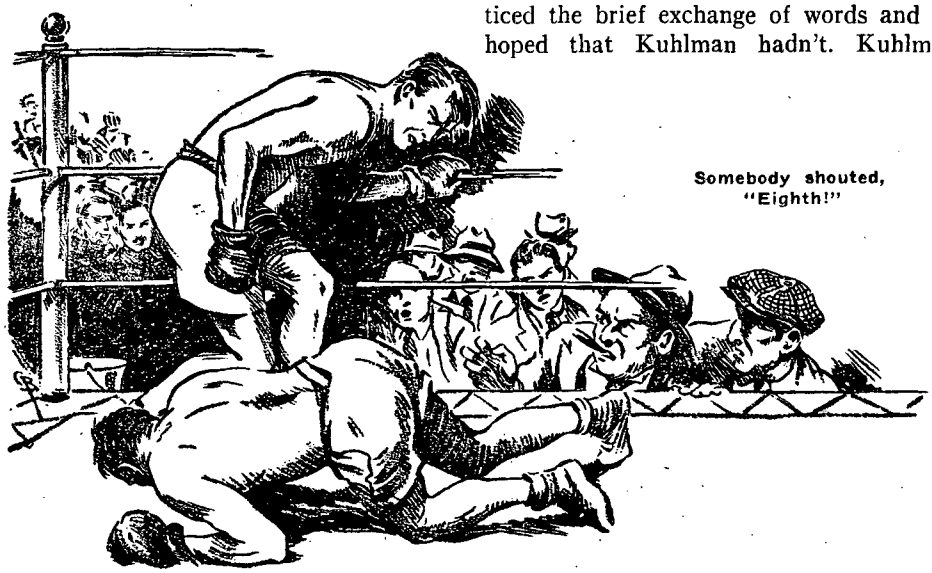
Vic Kuhlman, Dakota's New York manager, jerked his thumb toward the showers. "Okay for today, Kid," he said. He was a fat man with a broad face and a double chin. His hair had stopped growing on his head but it grew black and greasy on his face. He was known as a man who could find his way around. Dakota took his bathrobe from a second and looked again at Beth Cooper.

The girl was still watching Smokey Smith. She was small, dainty, even fragile; she had done her best to fit into the atmosphere of a fight-camp by wearing a trim blue suit and an unadorned jockey-type hat. She still stopped traffic. Not even the frown which put three lines in her forehead handicapped her. Dakota vaulted the ropes and almost landed in her lap.

"Right away quick," he said.

She nodded, but her smile was only a ghost of the smile that she usually gave him. "I'll be waiting in the car."

Vic Kuhlman was talking to two hard-looking men in flashy clothes whose faces were gray with after-shave talcum. Dakota didn't believe that Kuhlman had noticed the brief exchange of words and he hoped that Kuhlman hadn't. Kuhlman



Somebody shouted, "Eighth!"

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didn't approve of fighters having any girl friends.

Mike Rawson was different that way. Mike was lounging along in step with Dakota before the fighter was halfway to the showers. "Slip out the back way, Kid, if you're seeing the girl friend," he said. "I'll keep Kuhlman busy."

He was an old man, Mike, and quiet. The points of silver whiskers stuck through his bronzed skin and gave his face a different shade of gray than the Broadway crowd had. His eyes were different, too; they had a sun squint when he was thoughtful, not the lid-dropping look that these fellows got. He was a Westerner and Dakota understood him as he understood Dakota.

Kuhlman was against girl friends, because his idea of a date was something that you came home from about dawn with rings under your eyes; Mike always had an idea that a young fellow with a girl got stirred up more and made a better fighter. As he hopped under a shower, Dakota was thinking that he and Mike hadn't been very happy in New York. Out West they had done a lot of fighting and they hadn't wasted much time in talking; back East, the fighting didn't count so much. You had to spend practically all of your time making deals and seeing right people.

He was out of the shower and into his clothes in seven minutes flat; a clear-skinned, clear-eyed youngster who was only a little over a year out of college rings. There was nearly six feet of him and a little over a hundred and sixty pounds. He fought as a middleweight.

BETH COOPER was sitting in a long gray roadster that dwarfed her. The sun was hitting the curls that stuck out from under the jockey hat and bringing red glints out of the black. Her face in profile was pert rather than beautiful but her lips were set firmly as though there might be red glints in her disposition, too. Dakota wiped out the impression that he didn't like New York. They didn't have anybody like Beth Cooper out West.

"How did I make it?"

"Pretty speedy."

She spoke almost absent-mindedly, and she slapped the car into gear with unwonted viciousness. "I was watching that man—Smokey," she said. "He could have got up after you hit him, couldn't he?"

Dakota felt startled and looked it. "Sure. I guess so. I didn't try to kill him."

"He didn't get up. He pretended he was knocked out. That's what they call taking a dive, isn't it?"

She was so grimly, hostilely in earnest that Dakota didn't grin. "I never heard of a sparring partner taking a dive," he said. "He just had enough."

"If he did that in the ring, it would be taking a dive?"

She was being persistent and uncompromising and Dakota suddenly felt guilty for no reason at all. "Sure," he said. "If he stayed down on purpose, that would be going in the tank. Taking a dive means the same thing. If he quit because he was scared, that would just be yellow."

The girl tooled the gray roadster into a side road and stopped under a tree. Her eyes were very blue, very direct. "You've got a good record in the ring, haven't you, Dakota? Just as good as the record of the man you're going to fight?"

Dakota felt embarrassed. He looked down at the knuckles of his right hand. "Nobody's stopped me. Eleven kayos out of fourteen professional fights is pretty good. This Zorak, though, has kayoed twenty."

"Can you lick him, Dakota?"

Her eyes were suddenly far away. Her voice seemed far away, too, as though she were withdrawn from him. Dakota wet his lips.

"Sure." His eyes dropped to his knuckles again as he remembered something. "That is, I guess so."

Her eyes came back to him. "I'm going to bet all of my savings on you."

"No!" Dakota straightened and he could feel sweat trickling out of his hair.

"Why?"

"Prizefights are a bum bet. You can't

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tell . . ." His voice trailed off miserably.

Beth's eyes were disconcerting. She reached into the door pocket beside her and withdrew a paper which had been folded to the page upon which a famous gossip-column appeared. One pink-nailed finger ran down the column and stopped beside a leaded item.

> Mister Dakota Graney, who is in town for divers reasons, is working out daily at Jeff Murray's . . .

Dakota frowned. He had an uneasy feeling at the pit of his stomach. "What about it?"

"That could mean 'various' reasons, but I don't think it does."

Dakota looked away. There was nothing in the world that he liked to do more than he liked to look into the depths of Beth Cooper's eyes; but he couldn't look into them now. He couldn't find the words that he wanted, either. There wasn't any way in which a man could explain the prize-fight business to a girl. He didn't understand it himself.

All that he knew was that he had been a good fighter out West and he had slaughtered some other fellows who were supposed to be good. There was a lot of talk about his being champ some day. Mike Rawson had brought him East and the rest was vague. A man couldn't just have his own manager in New York. He had to have a New York manager, too, or he couldn't fight. Old Mike was broke and he had a family. Dakota was broke, too. They needed money. And Dakota could remember the worried look on the old timer's face the night that Vic Kuhlman came in as half-manager.

"They sure got us tied up," he'd said. "Maybe we'll have to ease up on some of these local boys, son, to get along."

There was nothing crooked about a proposition that is put like that. Dakota understood how it was. But this girl wouldn't understand. He wet his lips again.

"I never took a dive," he said.

"But you're going to take one this time?" She was relentless.

"No. I won't. But maybe I won't win. They want fighters that have got color to win fights. It draws crowds. They figure I haven't got color."

"Oh, so you never really licked anyone. You just outcolored them."

"No. Beth, listen. I used to think I wanted to be champion. Now I just want to make some money and get out. You can't be a fighter and just fight. You have to take orders . . ."

She slid away down on the seat and reached for the starter button with one small foot. "I'm taking you home," she said. "When I go out with a man, he's got to be a man; not a dummy that some man owns!"

"Please, Beth . . ."

He tried to put his arm around her and she stopped him with a look that landed like a left hook. "I'm taking you back," she said, "and you can stay up on the shelf with the rest of the package goods until somebody else takes you down."

TO EVERYONE else around the camp who had opinions on anything, Beth Cooper was a bright newspaper woman with a future; but she had never been a newspaper woman to Dakota Graney. She had been merely a lovely armful of girl with eyes that a man could drown in and black hair that glinted red. The morning after she left him, he became aware of her as a newspaper woman.

BOXING A WHITE SLAVE RACKET

The headline leaped out of the tab for which she worked. Beneath it was a scorching, withering blast that took the boxing game apart from the towering top-layer of its millionaires to the seamy foundation cracks where the lower orders crawled. Her name was signed to it and every phrase was a jolt that Dakota felt personally.

> The muscle marvels that the sports writers discuss so learnedly and that the public pays to see, are a puppet show with greasy gamblers and sure thing men pulling the strings. There isn't one of them with

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manhood enough to call his soul his own. Everything that a fighter does is done under orders. He eats what he is told to eat, sleeps when he is told to sleep—and dives when he is told to dive.

Diving, not boxing, is the most highly developed art of pugilism.

There was more of it, much more, and Dakota's face burned as he read it. Mike Rawson was not at the breakfast table and the sparmates and trainers who were at the table did not read newspapers. Pete the Greek had settled that custom long years before. "Readin' is bad for a fighter's eyes," the Greek had said learnedly. The remark had passed into tradition as an axiom.

Dakota had done five miles of roadwork before he saw that article, but he wasn't hungry after he read it. He got up slowly and went over to Mike Rawson's quarters. He knew that the paper was there ahead of him before he was closer than twenty yards. He could hear the hoarse bellow of Vic Kuhlman. He hesitated outside.

"Them column-fellers ain't dumb. They know this guy's been buzzing around with that newspaper-squaw. What'll they figger? Huh. What'll they figger?"

"I dunno. What?" Mike Rawson's drawl was unhurried.

"They'll figger she likes this guy. They'll figger she's sore that he's takin' orders. And they'll figger out the orders."

"Waal?"

"Well, hell! You been helpin' him. Now that's out. He stays put. No more dames. No more nothin'. See!"

Dakota turned away. He didn't want to see Kuhlman and it was no time to see Mike Rawson. Mike could be tough himself when somebody caused him a headache. He was a swell fight-manager, but he was still a fight manager—and there were times when a fighter who was wise stayed out of his way. Dakota trotted down to the ring. He shadow-boxed for a few minutes to warm up before his first sparring partner came out.

Smokey Smith had finished the workout yesterday—but he started it today. Dakota knocked him cold in forty seconds.

It was the shape of things to come. Beth Cooper stayed away from the camp and Dakota turned mean. He came up to an edge in his training and he was jumpy, querulous, hard on his sparring partners. Smokey Smith quit after two sessions, and after him there was a long parade. They didn't have names to Dakota; they were just pugs who weren't going to dive if he could help it.

The sports crowd took a new interest in him and commented favorably, but guardedly, on his form. They were profoundly skeptical. The gossip column had sounded the keynote again on the day after Beth Cooper's blast.

The sob sister who couldn't hold it is the heart of the pug from the Far West who just can't win. Maybe the little girl has heard something.

The fight was promising to be a sell-out despite the rumors. The middleweight champ was on the skids and it was generally believed that the winner of this scrap would take him easily. Steve Zorak was an ex-steel worker from the Pittsburgh region and there were trainloads of Pennsylvanians coming down to root for him. He hadn't changed his name to Casey or Sweeny when he went in the ring, even if he had dropped a few syllables. As a consequence, everybody in Pennsylvania who had a "z" in his name was hocking the family plate and betting on him to win.

Mike Rawson moved around the camp like a gloomy ghost. He didn't take his usual interest in things and Dakota couldn't talk to him as he once did. He tried to on the night that the item appeared.

"I'm not taking a dive for anybody, Mike," he said.

Mike Rawson stroked his chin nervously. "Kid, it's a big world. This is only a small part of it. Do what you're told and collect. It's better, Kid. This ain't Denver or St. Paul."

"I don't care, Mike. I'm leveling."

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Mike Rawson loaded a black pipe and tamped the tobacco down. "Nobody's told you to dive. Just don't go round shouting."

"Why not? A man doesn't have to whisper up alleys that he's honest, does he?"

"Sometimes. There's a young feller selling pencils outside of fight clubs around here that used to be a champ. He's blind, Kid—blind! They say he got it in the ring, but they tell me that he got blackjacked because he didn't obey orders . . ."

Mike Rawson stood up nervously. "I never bothered your fighting none when we were home, Kid, but I've seen enough of this game to know that even the championship ain't worth some things. Selling pencils ain't much of a living."

HE WALKED away without looking back and there was a wall between them after that. What made that wall worse from Dakota's standpoint was the fact that he could get the old man's point of view. The old man came from the same country that Dakota did. Neither of them read western stories because western stories were full of heroes. Out in their country, there never had been any heroes; merely smart men and dumb ones. The first rule of the wild days that had been so much lied about was: "Don't argue with the drop or with the fastest gun-hand!"

This was one of those cases. Two Westerners were under the New York drop and arguing was foolish. Still there was Beth Cooper.

She came around again on the day before the fight. Kuhlman was in town and Dakota was tapering off his training, punching the light bag a little and keeping his muscles limber. She was very straight and very pale.

"Dakota," she said, "I'd like to talk to you."

"Sure."

He tried not to growl but he was a fighter in the physical pink and the growl was there. They walked away from the camp. A hundred yards down a little-used back-road, she stopped.

"Dakota, you told me that you didn't care about being champion; that you just wanted to make some money and get out. Did you mean that?"

"I never told you anything that I didn't mean."

"You'd still do it."

He frowned at his hands. "If I could."

"You can." She leaned forward tensely, her fists clenched. "I know a university club that needs a physical director. You were a football player before you started boxing. Maybe you could work from the club to a coaching job, to your own school. You could go as far as you wanted . . ."

She was drilling with her fists, emphasizing each sharply bitten phrase. Dakota shifted on his feet. "What do I have to do?"

"Forget about this fight. Take it now. The things they are saying will ruin your chances."

She stopped as she saw his head shake. He wanted to be gently apologetic, but physical condition told; he was merely sullen. "I can't. I'm signed for this fight."

"Signed!" Her voice was bitter. "Yes. And sealed—and delivered."

His own eyes were hot. "A man's signature is good or it isn't."

"All right. Sign anything you want. I'm through."

There was a choke in her voice but he didn't get it. He looked at his hands and she turned her back on him. She marched alone down the road and he didn't know how to call her back. He spat angrily in the dust and he couldn't say any longer what he wanted nor how a world was managed in which each person had so many other people to please.

"I'm not just a muscle-marvel, either," he growled. "And nobody owns me."

He wasn't even sure of that last statement. Nobody had told him to lose to Steve Zorak, but nobody had told him to win, either. He kept thinking of the pencil seller who had been a world's champion and of Mike Rawson who had four kids who were all girls, and of how little difference it made in a big world if a fighter lost a fight or won it. Nothing added up.

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DAKOTA came down to the blazing lights of the ring on the night of the fight without any instructions. He had read the papers and he knew that the town blazed with rumors, but apart from the fact that it was a crazy fight-camp, he had seen nothing in his own camp to justify the rumors.

Only one fight expert was picking him to win, yet he had been the favorite when the match was made. Steve Zorak was good and he was tough and nobody had taken his measure; but Dakota had knocked out Ty Rainey who was a better man than any scrapper Zorak had ever fought. On form the fight figured close, but the whispered word that the fight was in the bag had gone further than the column which originated it.

Vic Kuhlman was in the ringside seat with a group of his over-dressed, gray-faced pals. The bright light glinted off the three rings that he wore on his right hand. He was talking when Dakota looked at him and his chinbone seemed to be moving around under three layers of skin.

Mike Rawson was up in the corner. He was grave and preoccupied. He patted Dakota's shoulder in a manner that was almost mechanical. "Good luck, Kid. Keep him away from you. He likes the going in close . . ."

The same old stuff. He knew how Zorak fought. He'd studied his style. He looked across the ring toward where Steve Zorak was sitting. The Balkan vote had been making a racket ever since Steve had been introduced and they were backed up by assorted wise guys who yelled support to their money.

The lights beat down. The referee called them to the center of the ring for instructions. Dakota watched Zorak come across the ring. The Pittsburgher was bow-legged and built in bunches. The muscles stuck out in bulging lumps on his arms and shoulders and chest. His chest was black with hair and he had a face that was mostly scowl; a punch-battered face that showed scar tissue over the eyes and cheekbone bulges. Zorak had won his fights but he had taken it while he was winning them. A tough gahooley who kept coming. Dakota's shoulders twitched nervously.

The moments before the bell were always tough.

He was unmarked himself and straight. He walked back to his corner to await the gong and he knew that he wouldn't be told to dive now. He didn't have to battle that issue out with anybody but the knowledge didn't ease his mind. The managerial board had probably decided that he would be troublesome. There were other ways of making a fighter do as he was told.

A mild drug could be slipped to a man between rounds, one that didn't lay him out but that fogged him up and made his judgment hazy, slowed his reflexes just enough to take away his chances. A man never tasted anything once he was in the ring and had been tagged a few times. He never knew what his seconds were putting in his mouth, either.

For just a second, Dakota's eyes ranged the crowd. They were a dark blur beyond the glare of ringlight and he wondered if Beth Cooper was out there somewhere. If they did slip him something and he went down—well, she would never believe him.

The gong wiped out all other sound.

DAKOTA came out fast behind his left hand. Zorak charged in rolling; a crouching fighter who was all angles, elbows and shoulders and skull. Dakota jabbed into the shell and felt his punches glance off. He tried to feint; Zorak feinted with him.

It was dull work. They sized each other up and circled. Usually Dakota didn't mind this feeling-out work. It was an important part of a fight. Tonight he was impatient. He had a fierce feeling of urgency. He had to open this man up and win fast. He didn't know how soon they might slip him a powder.

He threw his left and something thundered into him. Zorak hooked him under the heart with a right and for a split second his eyes hazed. In that tick of time, the Pittsburgher was inside of his de-

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fenses, pressing him close, drumming his body with short, stiff, unspectacular jolts that tore a fighter apart without registering on the crowd at all.

Dakota clinched and they wrestled over close to the ropes in Zorak's corner. One face swam in Dakota's eyes as he locked with the steel-worker and tried to free himself—the tense, white face of Beth Cooper.

She had come then! He didn't know. It could have been a mind-mirage. He had re-created that face so often in his thoughts.

Zorak tagged him on the chin at the break and Dakota went back on his heels. He caught Zorak with two stiff lefts as the man tried to follow up the punch and he saw the blood start from the man's lips. He hit Zorak twice more before they clinched again and the man caught him with a right hand again as they broke.

Dakota was clear-headed at the bell and cursing his own stupidity. He'd fought Zorak's fight and carried the fight to an infighter instead of staying away from him and stabbing him to death. His seconds worked on him and Mike Rawson growled: "Take it slowly. Work him out of it."

It was sound advice but Dakota no longer trusted Mike or anyone else. They were trying to nurse the fight along until they could slip him something. Steve Zorak from the steel plants was the man with color who could be steered into a championship; Dakota Graney was just another fighter from a small Western state that was too far away to send people in special trains to New York fights. The bell rang.

He came out slowly this time and he knew what he was going to do. He was going to shoot that left and he was going to take the right to the heart. He was going to pull that left when he shot it, hooking with it when Zorak dropped the right.

The right to the heart almost tore him apart but he was set for it and his left had juice on it when it steamed through to Zorak's chin. Zorak went back on his heels and for a moment he was out of his shell. Dakota poured three punches into him and sent him reeling to the ropes. He kept after him and refused to get in too close. Zorak's left eye ballooned and he played desperately along the strands, bouncing off them into a clinch when Dakota finally missed.

The roar of the crowd was a steady beat in Dakota's ears. He felt the hard body Zorak pressed against his. The man's hoarse voice came over his shoulder, clear enough to be heard through the howl of a pro-Zorak house.

"What's the matter with you, you fool! Hold that stuff—"

Dakota blinked. He was a little slow with his left and Zorak nailed his chin hard at the break. He went back with the punch and the steel man rolled after him, pumping short punches out of the shell of elbows and shoulders. The house was roaring approval now and Dakota backpedaled.

Steve Zorak bobbed and weaved in front of him like a hairy ape-man out of a dinosaur drama. Dakota stabbed at the target and the bell called him to his corner.

He could always think on that short walk to his corner. It was the only time during a fight when he could think. And he had something now to think about. Zorak hadn't talked to him as a fighter to an opponent; he had talked to him as a fellow-conspirator: "Hold that stuff!"

SUDDENLY it was all crystal clear. Zorak was going to take a dive. In the beginning, perhaps, Dakota had been scheduled to go in the tank but the rumors that had slipped out were the ruination of the plan. Those rumors had changed the odds. They had made the betting top-heavy with Zorak money and the gamblers hadn't been able to resist the coup.

All of those hard-working steel hands and all of those lads who played tips were going to lose their money to the slit-eyed boys who played the sure things. Zorak was going to dive.

As he sprawled on the stool with his seconds massaging his muscles, he could

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hear a snarling voice telling him to take his time. That would be Kuhlman who hadn't been able to stay in his ringside seat.

Beth Cooper!

The name seemed to leap into lights before Dakota's eyes. She was watching and she had been told that he was going to dive. She would see him win and she would believe in him again. What did he care about other people? Beth Cooper was going to see him win.

"She'll believe that I won on the level and I'll know different."

He knew then that he'd rather lose. He couldn't look her in the eye, knowing that the fight was just as phoney as she first suspected. But what could a man do? A minute between rounds was too short a time to think things through.

He hadn't thought them through by the time the bell rang. He knew only that he would be disgraced if he lost. Beth would never believe that he was on the level, and the fight crowd would throw him out. Mike Rawson would be banned, too, and Mike was all right. Mike couldn't afford to be banned. Mike had probably been worried about this angle, too. Mike was no gyp-artist. But if Dakota won, he would be working for the gyp-gamblers, playing their game for them—just as much a hired puppet as if he dived.

Zorak hit him a half dozen times before he got mentally untracked. And suddenly Dakota knew what he was going to do.

He couldn't stop Steve Zorak from diving if Steve wanted to dive; but he could make Steve Zorak fight for his life. He could divorce himself from any frame-up by making this a fight that the customers would remember for the rest of their lives. Other fights and other fighters might be rigged and rehearsed but the crowd was going to get its money's worth tonight.

He was opening up as he came to his decision. He went into Zorak and his body bent under the steel man's punches, but his own short choppy jolts were going home. A red haze swam in his eyes and he was hitting. He wasn't conscious of being hit. He was conscious only of a squat, hairy body before him that might be the body of a creature out of the caves or jungles. He was going to destroy that creature, tear it apart. . . .

He tasted his own blood in his mouth and the roar of the crowd was a blanket that fell on him occasionally—a blanket that he brushed off when he throw out his punches.

Zorak's eyes gleamed white as they locked at the ropes. His lips were flat on his teeth. He wasn't talking now; he was battling for his existence. Weary arms tangled in a clinch and again Beth Cooper's white face swam up from the crowd at ringside. She was standing and Dakota couldn't tell what her expression was nor anything about her except that she was there. He wrenched away from Zorak and Zorak nailed him. The bell rang and they went on fighting until the referee and a couple of seconds parted them.

Dakota didn't do any thinking between rounds. There were a number of people talking to him and he guessed that they were telling him that he was all wrong. He didn't give a miserable, two-for-a-nickel toot. The hysteria of those last few minutes in the ring had communicated itself to the house and everything was bedlam. In the opposite corner, Steve Zorak was snarling and cursing at his handlers; and if he had ever agreed to dive, he had wiped it out of his mind.

No one who saw the fourth round ever forgot it. Neither of the men who fought it remembered any part of it.

DAKOTA'S only impression was of a charging gorilla who was trying to kill him, and of his own determination to wipe Steve Zorak clean out of ring history.

Dakota went down once. He knew that, because it was so hard to get up again that his head cleared. Afterward he was lost in the mad lust to hit and keep hitting. He had thrown science to the winds long ago except for such science as is instinctive to

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a trained ringman. At the end, his eyes cleared again.

He felt a shock run up his arm and then he saw Steve Zorak. The man's shoulders were against the ropes and his face was a bloody, snarling mask. He was trying to pull his right hand up and it was too heavy for him. Some instinct whispered, "This is it!" to Dakota Graney, and Dakota swung.

He walked on rubber legs, then, to a neutral corner. He didn't need the referee's count to tell him that Steve Zorak would not get up again. He had thrown that last punch—and he knew. He didn't look back.

The referee's arm swept down with the ten-beat and flattened out with the palm to the floor. Mike Rawson was in the ring with an arm around Dakota's shoulders and he was shouting.

"A grand fight and an honest fight, Kid. I've had our share of the purse to bet with all week, but I didn't bet it. I didn't bet it, Kid, because we both leveled."

There was more of it, but the referee came for Dakota's arm and lifted it aloft. Dakota looked toward Zorak's corner and Beth Cooper was over there. She was standing on a chair and yelling at him.

She looked wonderful. . . .

It took hours of expert work to make Dakota presentable for a date, but Beth Cooper was waiting. She drove him up the Drive and even New York's mad tempo was slowing with the approach of dawn. They pulled in against a railing and looked at the Hudson.

"You weren't wrong, Beth," he said huskily. "The wise money won after all. I couldn't help it."

She shook her head. "It's all wise money. Or it thinks that it is. Most of those who lost thought that they were betting on a sure thing. I won't weep for them . . ."

He put his arm around her shoulders and she didn't draw away. She hadn't asked about his future plans and he had an idea that she wouldn't. She would trust him and he wouldn't let her down. His arm tightened.

"And you're not sore at me any more?"

She lifted her head and her eyes were deep enough to drown in, her lips parted. She laid one hand against his chest. "No. In fact—in fact, I like you a lot. You've got color . . ."

He bent her back and his head went down till his lips were pressing hers and time was something that had existed once and existed no longer. She freed herself at last and her eyes were very wide.

"Love me?" he said.

She nodded then.

"Oh, yes. I always did."

"Why?"

Her smile drove the fright out of her eyes. She held his head away with one finger against his chin. "For divers reasons," she said. "It means various."

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Weasel, Weasel...

By
FRANK R. PIERCE

Author of "Highpockets," "Eagle's Wings," etc.

When there are stranger things done 'neath the midnight sun—No-Shirt McGee will have a finger in 'em

IT'S been six months since I've seen Tip Hamlin. He's deputy United States marshal at Cold Deck, Alaska. We come over the Chilkoot Pass together in the early days.

Tip had a frail little wife, just eighteen years old, and most of us thought she was goin' to her death. We figgered she'd never stand the hardships of the stampede, and that she must have a tremendous love for Tip to follow him. And we figgered right, too.

One day I asked why she'd come along. "I'd rather spend a year on the trail with Tip, then die," she said, "than to be away from him and safe in a snug home. We are young, Mr. McGee, and every day is precious."

Well, somehow Ella Hamlin survived, but it was mostly because Tip looked after her. The love of them two helped a lot of us from growing cynical because of other things we saw on the trail and in camp. It sorta kept our faith in true love alive.

"How's Ella been the last six months?" I ask Tip as we stopped and shook hands.

"No-Shirt," he answers, "you've been askin' about Ella for forty years, now. And always the answer is the same—she's fine. And I'm goin' to keep her that way."

There was a kind of desperation in his voice, like he was fighting with his back to the wall, but I didn't let on I'd noticed it. I noticed his cheeks were flushed and his lips purple. His hands was kinda bluish, too.

I knew the signs.

"You'd better do somethin' about that blood pressure of yours," I thought as we separated. "You're liable to pop off sudden."

I'm feelin' pretty low as I go down the street. Tip and Ella never had no children. All they had was each other, and if Tip drops off it's going to be mighty tough on Ella. The North owes her plenty. Every time there was an epidemic, with men dying like flies, and needing the nursing only a woman can give, she'd be in the thick of it. She'd hop into an Indian village, pronto, and take care of a flock of sick kids while the air reeked of smoke and fish.

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I look over my shoulder just before turning the corner and I see Tip Hamlin turning into Doc Pegler's office. "Tip will get his orders from Doc," I says, "but will Tip obey 'em?" That's the question. You know how these big strong lads are—they think bull strength will take 'em through anything.

Later on that day I drop into Doc's office myself. "You're lookin' fit, No-Shirt," he says. "They must feed you well in jail."

"You always was a card, Doc," I answers. "I'm here to talk about Tip Hamlin. I've never seen such a change in a man in six months' time. What's wrong with him, or ain't it professional to answer questions like that?"

"You're an old friend," Doc answers, "and I can see he's pretty serious, so I'll talk." He lights up one of his big black cigars and at the risk of getting sick at the stomach, I light up one, too. "Have you ever seen a weasel after a squirrel, No-Shirt?" he asks.

THAT'S somethin' I've seen more'n once. At first the squirrel is frisky and gay. He's got the speed and he knows it. He bounces gaily away, but pretty soon the weasel catches up. After awhile the squirrel gets worried. He commences to tire. You'll see him looking back all the time. If you're close enough you can see the terror in his eyes and his heart poundin' against his sides. And always the weasel is closing in.

From the first the weasel has confidence. He knows the squirrel is bound to crack; bound to tire out. When I'm along I usually bump off the weasel, but I've always wished sometime a squirrel would find the strength and nerve to turn on the weasel and kill him.

"What's a weasel got to do with Tip Hamlin," I ask. And come to think of it he had the same tense, worried manner of the squirrel. "He's no squirrel. He ain't afraid of anything that walks."

"You're almost right, No-Shirt," he answers. "Tip is afraid of but one thing —Ella's health. That and the fear she'll be left alone in the world. Like a lot of Alaskans they were in the money several times."

"Yeah," I agrees, "you put it back into the ground again. "Developing ground interests the real miner more'n the gold he takes out. What's Tip worth?"

"Nothing! He has his job," Doc Pegler answers. Then he tells me what's back of it all.

Squaw Carter shot it out with a trapper in Yukon Territory. The Mounted Police took after him, so he crossed the border and opened up a business in Cold Deck. His business is rotten whisky, a few squaws for the honest miners to dance with and a man or two to knock 'em in the head and roll 'em for their pokes. He's committed a couple of murders on this side of the border and Tip has been working up the case. He knows Squaw done it, but he can't prove it on him, nor can he find the bodies. But Squaw don't know how much Tip knows, or how little.

He's made up his mind to shoot it out with Tip if he ever comes to arrest him. Gunplay is the last thing Squaw wants and so he looks for ways and means of getting rid of Tip without a gunfight. Squaw don't know nothin' about psychology as such. But he's seen men at his gambling games, tense with high blood pressure and plenty desperate, die of heart failure when the pressure is put on. He's seen men, with some big problem hanging over their head, gradually go to pieces. So he looks around for ways of breakin' down Tip Hamlin.

And he finds 'em.

It ain't long until he learns about Tip's one fear—the fear he'll be killed in the line of duty, or by accident, and Ella will be left alone in the world. From that moment on he makes Tip feel he's liable to have to shoot it out any minute. He trumps up tense situations; he gets his men to hold up miners in distant parts of Tip's district. He keeps him on the go, and always under pressure.

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SQUAW CARTER was a weasel all right. Doc had learned he watched, with high relish, Tip's slow but sure cracking. It was noised about Tip's heart might quit on him any second. And he sure looked it. "How much longer can he last, Doc?" I asks bluntly.

"Not much longer at the rate he's going down grade," Doc answers. "I've put him on a diet. That helps, but Squaw Carter is the real trouble."

"I'll get a bunch of the boys together and run him out of camp," I suggests.

"No, Tip wouldn't want that," Doc explains. "It's something he's got to work out himself."

"Let's arrest Squaw and shove him across the border. The Mounted Police will take care of him," I suggest.

"Squaw should hang three times," Doc answers. "We all know that, but we haven't the evidence on this side to convict him. He's as smooth as a wolverine and as vicious. And I doubt if the Mounted Police believe they can get a conviction. Otherwise they would have requested arrest and deportation."

"What a mess!" I moan.

"Exactly," Doc says. He walks over to the window and looks out on the thriving mining camp of Cold Deck, but I knew he ain't seein' a thing. "I may have to prescribe the most powerful dose I've given a man in forty years' practice," he says.

"Kill or cure?" I asks.

"Yes," he answers, "kill or cure."

A couple of nights later I drop in to Squaw's place for a drink. Us McGees have stout stomachs where whisky is concerned even if Doc's cigars do make me giddy. "Pour out a snort, Squaw," I orders.

He pours me one and says, "Been away haven't you?" And when I says I have, he goes on and asks, "Notice any change in Tip? He's failin'. I'm sorry to see it. He's one of the best men the frontier ever knew."

"He's at his best when he's crowded," I says pointedly.

Squaw looks at me a long time. "Time and his wife have softened him," Squaw says. "He's slow on the draw. His arm's stiff."

"But it's steady as a rock," I says.

"I was tellin' him the other day he should get a young deputy to help him out, that if he had a real dangerous man to arrest—a desperate one, he might be killed," Squaw continues.

"You're a wolverine, Squaw," I says evenly. "you had a fair idear of the damage that would do to Tip or you wouldn't have said it. Here's somethin' to mull over. A poet or somebody once told a story about a man who was hoisted on his own petard. May be you're makin' yourself a petard."

"What is it, a kind of a spear?" he asks.

"Nope," I answer, "it's a kind of a bomb. Sometimes they kill the mugs that use 'em. Somethin' like a man blunderin' into his own setgun."

Squaw looks me right in the eye. His blue eyes are as cold as death itself and his lips are thin and tight. "Tip Hamlin must be in bad shape," he says, "so many of his friends are worrying about him."

I MEET Ella on the street a couple of days later and she invites me up for supper. "Come early," she urges, "before Tip is home. I want to talk about him."

I showed up early and found a flock of swell odors comin' from the kitchen. She talks about the early days and gradually leads up to what's most on her mind—Tip.

"He insists he's not worrying," she says, "but I know he is. He needs a change of climate. If we only had the money, but we haven't. I don't know what to do."

"Leave it to Doc," I advise. A change of climate wouldn't help any. I knew Tip wouldn't leave Cold Deck. It would look too much like he was runnin' away. I could've passed the hat and raised

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enough money for a round trip to California.

"I'm leaving it to Doc," she says. "But he doesn't seem to be helping any. No-Shirt, did you ever see a squirrel trying to throw a weasel off its trail?"

"Sure," I says, but her question gave me a jolt. She had noticed it too.

"That's Tip," she says quietly. "You never knew of a squirrel turning on the weasel?"

"There's always a first time," I answer.

She didn't say anything.

Tip came in and we had a little drink. He took a short one because the doctor had ordered it. I really went to town on the roast mountain sheep Ella had in the oven. Tip had to eat light because Doc said so and it made him mad. I could see he thought life wasn't worth living when he watched me eat and couldn't eat hisself. Then he'd glance at Ella and everything seemed worth while.

I learned plenty about how quick a woman can change the expression on her face that night. Her soul, filled with worry, was there to be read when he wasn't looking. But when he turned, all you saw was confidence.

We talked a lot that night about men hangin' theirselves if given enough rope, and men hoisted on their own petard. When I got out in the fresh air and thought back, it struck me Tip was the one who'd brought up them points. Me and Ella had tried to avoid 'em

Three weeks passed and then a trapper reported somebody had cleaned out his fur cache. Tip went out to look things over. He was gone five days. When he came back the strain was on his face. He'd have moments when he'd have to stop and sorta breathe hard. I could see the pulses in his temples pounding heavily.

"Same cuss who's been raisin' hell around here ever since Squaw crossed the border," he said. "One of Squaw's men." He got up and began pacin' back and forth across his office. "I used to be able to let down, relax, after these hard treks," he said. "But I can't any more."

While he was still pacing the room, a miner, with his head bandaged up, stumbles in. "I got cracked on the head, Tip," he says, "as I was bendin' over my gold pan washin' the last of my clean-up sand. The thief took the clean-up, wrecked the cabin, found the rest of my gold and left me layin' there."

"I'll go out," Tip says.

"No, lemme go," I says. "You can swear me in as a special deputy."

"The fight," he says, "is on me and every tin-horn, sure-thing man and bum in the North knows it."

When he came back a week later, Doc was waitin' for him. "Before you try to let down, Tip," he says, "come over to my office. You can come along, too, No-Shirt."

I FOLLOWED the pair into Doc's and we all sat down. Doc examined him—took his blood pressure, pulse and all that. Then he says, "Tip, you've always faced the truth, haven't you. You're facing the truth of what would happen to Ella if something would happen to you, right now."

"That's the size of it," Tip admits.

"Suppose I told you you had less than twenty-four hours to live, what would you do?"

Tip looked scared, but it was worry over Ella and not hisself. "I'd face the situation," he answers. "I'd go home, have a meal with Ella. I'd kiss her goodbye like I always do, then I'd come downtown and take care of my unfinished business. After that I guess I'd go home. And if that's the truth, Doc, I'd like to have No-Shirt go along with me, so she couldn't be alone when . . . when . . ."

He didn't finish, but we understood. I could see Doc was goin' through a struggle, but pretty soon he got the upper hand of hisself. "Then you'd better start in right now, Tip," he says. "The way you're going, I don't know how much longer you can last."

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"Thanks, Doc," Tip answers. "But I think I'll sorta reverse my plan. I think I'll do the unfinished business first, then join Ella. I'm going to arrest Squaw Carter."

"Go ahead," Doc says. "No-Shirt and I'll come along. I'll keep out of the way. And I never saw a McGee yet that couldn't protect his hide."

None of us realized how Squaw had posted his men around the camp until we started down the street. The Carter outfit knew the marshal was on his way to make an arrest. And they figgered Tip must've found evidence on this last trip of his or he wouldn't be acting just as soon as he hit camp.

Here and there we'd see a Carter man leaning again' a building, but alert. And pretty soon we began to see the law and order lads, lining up to take a hand in case anybody starts ganging up on the marshal.

I could tell by the way Tip was breathing that he was tense and just about ready to crack wide open. You could see his breath come in short jerks, and his face was almost livid. "Do you get the set-up, Doc?" I whispers. "If Squaw kills Tip, his outfit's ready to see the boys here in camp don't take a hand in the play."

"I'm not watching the boys," Doc answers, "I'm watching my patient."

A minute later I groan. Squaw Carter's just come from his saloon and is crossin' the street to the general store where he buys his grub for the lunch counter. It looks natural enough, and you couldn't prove it was part of a well-planned move to give hisself all the breaks. But it was. The sun was gettin' pretty well down and it would flood Tip like a spotlight, and at the same time partly blind him.

"Wait until he gets into the store," I warns, "then figger it out so the sun'll be in his eyes."

"You've no time to wait, Tip," Doc cuts in. "It's now or never." He turns on me. "Keep your mouth shut, McGee."

"I'm sorry," I says, "but that seemed like the thing for him to do. Is he as near to a stroke as all that?"

Doc nodded.

"He is."

"Just a minute, Squaw," Tip calls. "You're under arrest for murder. Anything you say will be used against you."

I COULD tell by the expression on Squaw's face that he was sure Tip had the goods on him at last. His guilty conscience helped things along plenty. He never said a word but his hand made a gesture towards the butt of his six-gun.

It was a trick to make Tip draw first. Tip went for his gun with that stiff hand of his and it seemed to catch in the holster a second or two. Squaw's gun roared and I saw Tip's knees buckle. He almost went down.

Squaw's gun cracked a second time and I knew he hurried the shot because he saw Tip's gun was out of the holster. Tip staggered and went to his knees as Squaw got in a third shot.

Then Tip fired, and Squaw Carter's body winced and grew rigid. He seemed to kinda jerk up on his toes and stand there a second. Before he fell, Tip was returnin' his gun to the holster. He'd seen men die plenty of times and he knew no second shot would be needed.

The muzzle of the gun was almost in the holster when suddenly Tip pitches forward on his face and a shudder runs through his body. "Squaw got him," I says.

Doc doesn't answer. Instead he yells, "Somebody get a stretcher. Somebody else look after Squaw."

There're no stretchers handy but several men bring a cot that they got from the general store. I go over to Squaw Carter with a couple of others. He's breathing his last.

"I thought he wouldn't risk it," he gasped, "on account of his . . . wife. Thought he'd crack . . . first. He musta had the goods on me. He was so slow on the draw . . . took my lead and was . . . like iron."

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He tried to say something more, but none of us caught it.

I trails the cot to the four-bed hospital Doc has on the second floor of his home. Doc gives him a quick examination and about that time Tip opens his eyes. "His lead never got me, Doc," he says, "I pretended he'd hit me knowin' he was wolf enough to be over-eager for the kill. It gave me time to get in my shot. What's wrong with me, Doc? Stroke?"

That's what he's waiting for.

"You just passed out from the reaction," Doc explains. "You've been on edge for months, then suddenly you settle your problem in the only way it could be settled. It was a desperate prescription I compounded for you—kill or cure proposition—and it cured. I hadn't any choice but to tell you you only had a short time to live. And that'd been true if things had gone on as they had been going. I figured you'd finish your unfinished business. But you've got to rest several weeks, get your blood pressure and nerves straightened out. After that it's fine sailing for Ella and you."

Doc turns to us and says, "Now clear out, all of you, and let Tip start his rest cure."

I'm the first to leave. I'd seen the weasel crowd his luck too much and the victim turn on him and win. I'm feelin' pretty good—so good in fact I head straight for Ella Hamlin's cabin to tell her all about it.

Looking Ahead!

TIN MONEY

In the bleak white wastes of Alaska No-Shirt McGee found a man dying—and from him No-Shirt learned a way to a million-dollar fortune. Beginning an exciting new novel of mining and skullduggery in the frozen land, by

FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

THE BEGINNINGS OF MICHAEL COSTELLO

The clang of the big engine's bell—the cry of "Fire!"—the thudding hoofs of the galloping horses—these things were like wine in the Costello kid's blood. He had to be a fireman. But he was too small; the all-powerful ward boss had it in for him; and the Jinx was his fairy godmother. Irresistible force meets immovable obstacle . . . and the sparks fly. An exciting novelet by

KARL DETZER

NOMAD'S DEBT

It takes a thief to catch a thief, and only an Indian can know the ways of another Indian. And that's why Charlie Dicks, the Mounties' Man Friday, was given a chance for a uniform. It's also why he almost muffed it. A novelet of Northwoods, by

C. F. KEARNS

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—OCTOBER 15TH

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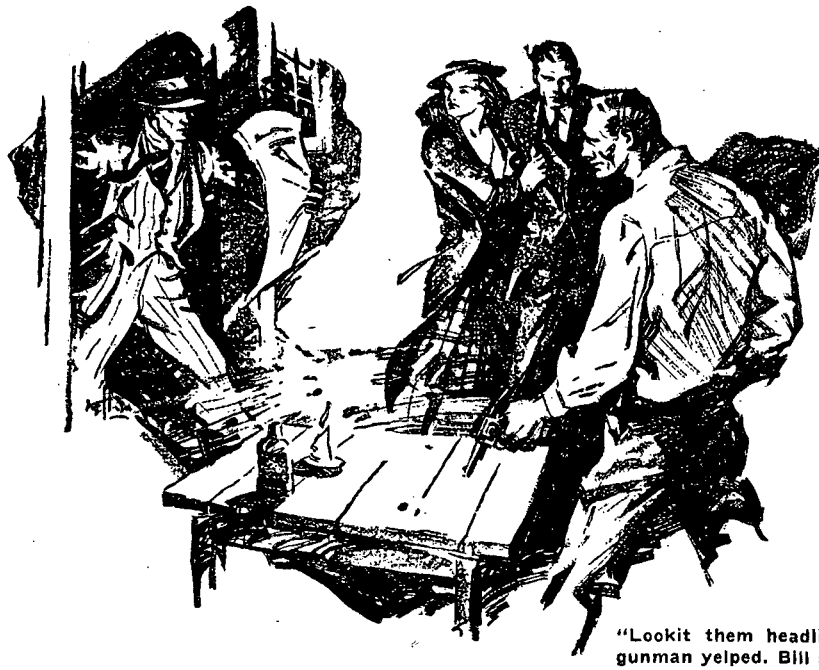

"Lookit them headlines," the gunman yelped. Bill shuddered

It's Hard to Die

By WALTER RIPPERGER

BELIEVING that his brother Arthur has shot himself because of illegal juggling of the securities entrusted to their firm, Bill Squire sets out to make what restitution he can. Max Wax, insurance broker and wizard of dubious finance, takes advantage of the two-year suicide clause in Arthur Squire's insurance policy and refuses to pay out the two hundred thousand dollars that would enable Bill to clear up the biggest looted account—the Dale fund.

Bill does not know how carefully Max Wax has planned. Through the expert services of an ex-convict confederate, Gleason, planted in the Squire office, Max has stolen the securities, replacing them with worthless issues of his own, juggled the Squire books, and invented the suicide note that Bill had suppressed — admitting embezzlement. On Wax's orders Gleason has forged Arthur's name to the note. That night, satisfied that Gleason's usefulness is at an end, and fearing that Police Captain Beak Toll may break Gleason's nerve, Max calmly bashes Gleason over the head and drops him out the twelfth story window. He informs Toll that Gleason, too, has taken his life.

MEANWHILE Bill decides to get himself killed. Wax, guessing Bill's plan and reluctant to part with the two hundred thousand premium on Bill's policy, sets the machinery in motion to have Bill arrested on the embezzlement charge, thus stowing him safely away in jail for at least ten years.

When Bill learns that he may be arrested, he decides, in spite of his love for Gloria Dale—or perhaps because of it—to accede to the proposition of the wealthy, exotic Carmen Gomez who has coolly announced that she would be only too pleased to pay him any sum he wants if he will marry her.

But then Bill finds himself trapped by Finger Gannon, a gangster, whose hideout Bill has claimed he knows, hoping to get Gannon to have him taken for a ride. Gannon promises to help Bill out by killing him, but when he hears of Bill's two hundred thousand dollar insurance policy, he decides to cash in for himself. He sends two of his men to Bill's office to bring the policy

The first installment of this three-part serial, herein concluded, was printed in the Argosy for August 27

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which he intends to force Bill to sign over to him. "If this is a plant, fellow" he tells Bill—"if those two aren't back before six, well—it'll be just too bad for you. . . ."

CHAPTER X

DEATH RINGS THREE TIMES

JOE and Butts did come back—just as darkness was setting in. There was someone with them—a girl, Gloria Dale. Bill Squire tried to get up but fell back. He wanted to cry out; he succeeded only in making some oddly strangled sounds.

Gloria looked about the dimly lit room. She saw Bill. "Bill!" she cried. "You're not—you're not hurt?"

Bill shook his head, a desperate look in his hot, tense eyes.

"Naw, he's not hurt." The voice came from behind her.

She swung around and saw Finger Gannon sitting at the table, his coat off, the gun across his chest. She looked into his dead, white face and instinctively recoiled. The bluish line that was Finger Gannon's mouth went aslant. It was as though he were smiling.

"Relax, baby," he said, "relax."

Gloria fell silent. She stood beside Bill Squire, looking from one to the other of the three men.

"What kept you?" Gannon demanded. "Any trouble?"

"The first part was easy," Joe said. He reached into his pocket, brought out the insurance policy and tossed it down on the table in front of Finger Gannon. "We went up to this dope's office, and there was only a clerk there. While he's talking, Butts slapped him from behind with the hose. The safe was nothing. They must have bought it second-hand; they don't make 'em that easy any more. You could hear the tumblers clanking in the next block."

"Did you get anything besides this?" Gannon pointed to the policy.

"Naw, there was nothing in that tin can but a lot of papers," Butts injected with disgust. "We had trouble getting the dame. She only showed up an hour ago. We told her that Squire was hurt and he'd sent us to get her. We put it on thick." Butts grinned. "After that it was easy. She hopped in the car and asked no questions—she's a nice kid that way."

Ma had come in. She stood a little uncertainly in the doorway, holding onto the frame, an expression of spite in her watery eyes as they rested on Gloria.

"Get us some grub, Sadie," Gannon said. "We got another guest."

"Grub?" Ma said. "There isn't any food. It's all gone. Joe'll have to go back to town and get some."

Joe cursed. "Why didn't you say so when we left this morning? It ain't safe for me to go back to town every few minutes. One of these times somebody's going to spot me."

"I forgot to tell you," Ma said.

"If you wouldn't hit the gin bottle until it pours out of your ears," Joe barked at her, "you wouldn't forget."

Gannon rose slowly and came and stood beside Joe. Gannon slapped him hard across the face, leaving four ugly weals on Joe's cheek. Then he went back to his chair.

"That's no way to talk to an old lady," Gannon said without inflection. "Go get the grub. Take the flivver with the Michigan license-plates."

Joe, holding his hand to his face, went out, muttering.

GANNON turned his stony face so that he could look at Gloria. He stroked his thin, inflexible mouth with the oddly short middle finger of his left hand, looking down at Bill Squire's life-insurance policy.

"Your boy friend's changed his mind," he said to Gloria. "He ain't gonna leave you all this dough, baby. He's a great pal of mine and he likes to think of me old mother out in Montana being taken care of. He's gonna endorse this over to her, ain't that so, pal?"

Slowly Gannon's head swung around until his murky, fixed eyes rested full on Bill Squire.

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Bill Squire moistened his parched lips. "If I do what you want me to," he asked in a voice cracked with strain, "what is going to happen to her, to Miss Dale?"

"You don't have to worry," Finger Gannon said softly, "about what's gonna happen to her if you *do* like you're told. You've got to worry what's gonna happen to her if you *don't* do like you're told. That's what I had the boys bring her here for."

Bill held back the epithet that hovered on his lips.

"Do it, Bill, do what he wants," she cried. "I don't understand it, but—" Finger Gannon frightened her. His very immobility emphasized his lack of any human feeling. She turned to him. "We can go when he signs—?"

Finger Gannon shook his head in that stony way of his.

"That ain't the way it's gonna work, baby. Your boy friend came here to get himself killed. He begged me to kill him, and I promised him I would, didn't I, pal?"

Bill said nothing. It was too late for talk. They were going to kill him. But then he'd wanted to die. Or had he? Had he ever really wanted it?

"The boy friend is sure sweet on you, baby," Gannon whispered. "Think of him making over a life insurance policy for two hundred grand to you and then digging me up and begging me to bump him off."

A smothered cry escaped Gloria.

"He wanted you to have the money quick, but he's changed his mind. Now he wants me old mother to have it."

"But you don't have to kill him," she protested wildly. "You don't have to commit murder."

"It won't be murder, baby. It'll be a pleasure," Gannon whispered, "and it works out nice. The policy's all paid up for and I won't have to worry about him keeping up the premiums or going to the cops."

"He won't do that, I promise you," Gloria breathed.

"It's no use," Bill Squire said. "You don't know who this is. This is Finger Gannon. He enjoys killing people. That's why I came here in the first place."

Gloria closed her eyes with a shudder. Gannon was looking at Bill Squire, waiting.

"I won't endorse it," Bill Squire said, his voice hard, "not until I know Miss Dale is absolutely safe."

"You'll change your mind," Finger Gannon said, "when we start taking her to pieces."

Gloria suddenly stood up. Her face was drawn, drained of every bit of color.

"Don't sign it, Bill," she said. "I see now they can't let either of us go if you sign it, so if they're going to kill us, let them. I don't care what they do to me."

"Right," Bill said as boldly as he could. But in his heart he knew he was bluffing. He knew that if they started to torture her, he wouldn't be able to stand it. He'd break down and do anything they wanted him to do.

GANNON took the tin shade and the chimney off the lamp. He brought the knife out of his pocket, opened the long, thin blade and began twisting it in the flame of the lamp.

Gloria didn't have any idea what he was doing, but she was afraid, terribly afraid. She looked frantically about the room, at the sallow, pinched face of Butts Crimpey and saw no hope there. She looked at Ma in the doorway. Ma was giggling. All the apprehension that Gloria had felt as the car had turned off the main road and into the narrow lane, was now realized.

"What's he doing that for? What's he heating the knife for?"

Bill Squire swallowed twice. His throat was drier than sand. Gannon answered for him.

"This isn't for you, pal. I'm just going to make it easier for the girl friend. I figure maybe she won't like to see you sign away all that dough that you were going to leave her."

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"Wait, wait," Bill Squire said in a strident tone. "Give me time to think."

Gloria, watching him, grew more terrified. She saw the utter despair in his eyes, the beads of perspiration on his gray, lean face, his mouth working soundlessly, his hands clenching and unclenching.

Gannon kept turning the knife in the flame, watching the blade, completely absorbed in his task.

"Bill, what is it?" Gloria cried. "What are you afraid of, what is he going to do?"

Bill sagged for a moment, then he straightened up. "Nothing, darling, nothing."

Gannon looked up and stared at him.

"Give it to me," Bill said. He whispered now, almost the way Gannon did, only more hoarsely. "Give it to me." With a hand that shook, he reached into his vest pocket for his fountain pen.

Finger Gannon put the knife down. He picked up the policy, brought it over and placed it in front of Bill Squire. Bill scratched out the endorsement that had made it over to Gloria Dale.

"What'll I say?" he said.

"Just the way it was before," Finger Gannon said, his voice more soft, "only instead of her name, you put in me mother's. It's Katie Gannon, Butte, Montana."

Bill wrote. He held his hand as steady as he could. He gave the policy to Gannon. The gangster looked at it.

"That's fine," he said, "that's fine." He waited for the ink to dry; then he went over and stuck it in the pocket of the coat that hung over the back of his chair. "Now we'll have a drink to celebrate." He looked at Ma.

Ma turned and wove her way out into the hall. Nobody said anything. Gannon picked up the knife and spat on the blade to see if it was cold. It sissed and he put it back on the table. Ma came back with whisky and four empty glasses. She had another half filled with gin for herself.

Gannon poured out drinks—two generous portions for his guests, a medium-sized one for Butts and a very small one for himself. Butts passed the tray. Bill took the glass, but Gloria shook her head. Gannon said:

"Might as well have a last drink, baby. It'll do you good."

A last drink? She said, "You mean—you mean you'll let us go now?"

Gannon waited until Ma and Butts had taken their glasses off the tray, then he raised his.

"To me mother in Montana—the best mother a boy ever had." He tossed off the liquor.

THE glass rattled against Bill's teeth as he started to drink. The whole thing was weird, beyond belief. He put the glass down.

"I'm not afraid," he said angrily. "I'm not afraid."

"Of course you ain't, pal," Finger Gannon whispered. "Why should you be?"

"You mean," Gloria said again, "we can go; that nothing—nothing's going to happen?"

Gannon didn't answer her. He looked at Ma.

"How does it taste, Sadie?" he whispered.

"I wish he hadn't signed so quickly," Ma said, giggling.

Gannon turned his head so that he could look at Gloria. "What was it you asked me, baby?"

"I asked you if you were going to let us go now."

Gannon moved his head from side to side, slowly. "Be reasonable," he said. "That wouldn't make sense. What good would this policy be to me old mother in Montana if my pal here, kept on living? Besides, I promised him I'd give him the works. That's what you came here for, isn't it, pal?"

The moment was at hand. Bill knew it, and oddly enough he wasn't afraid. A sort of fatalistic calm seemed to sweep over him as far as he himself was concerned. But what of Gloria?

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"You won't need her any more," Bill said. "Let her go and we'll have it over with."

"I said before that you were quite a guy," Gannon said, "but that you were awful dumb. She'd tell the cops or the insurance company and then the policy wouldn't be no good because you didn't sign it over because you wanted to. You don't love me old mother in Montana the way I do. I *made* you sign it, and that wouldn't be any good."

"She won't tell anybody," Bill said. "She'll promise you, and you can take her word for it."

Slowly, Gannon removed the gun from its holster.

Bill got up. With his hobbled feet it was hard for him to stand erect, but he managed it by resting one hand on the little table beside him. He faced Gannon. Gloria crowded close to him. Her hand took hold of his arm, closed about it tightly.

"Do you mean it, Gannon? Both of us?"

"That's the way it's got to be, pal," Gannon said in a chill whisper.

"I want it to be both of us, Bill. Think of what might happen to me if I stayed here behind—without you—with these men. I'd rather be dead—dead with you." Gloria's voice didn't tremble.

"The girl's got sense," Gannon said, nodding a couple of times. "My boys here sometimes ain't so respectful towards women as I am." Slowly his gun rose. "It ain't gonna hurt."

His trigger finger tensed.

BILL'S eyes were nothing but black holes, but he held himself still and erect, his teeth buried in his lower lip. There was the faint noise of an approaching car. Gannon cocked his head to one side. Then a pounding on the door, the usual signal, but more frantic this time.

"It's Joe," Gannon said. "Let him in, Ma."

Ma said, "Wait until I come back. I want to see it."

Gannon waited. Joe came bursting in.

"I got a paper, the *Chronicle*, chief! Look what it says!"

"Wait until I'm through."

Once more Gannon started to level his gun.

"Wait, chief, wait! Read!"

Gannon lowered his gun. He moved his body around and then his head. Joe held the paper in front of him, pointing with his finger.

Finger Gannon read:

$500,000.00 REWARD

For information leading to the release or for the actual release of William Squire, unharmed, at any prearranged spot. All negotiations strictly confidential. Reply to:

Box 333
Chronicle Building
Barbary Street, Pearsonville.

Gannon read it once. He read it twice then with the paper in his hand he walked over to Bill Squire.

"This is something, pal," he said. "What does it mean?"

Bill read it and frowned. He shook his head. He had a notion, a very definite notion what it was, but he couldn't make up his mind then and there what his best answer ought to be.

"I don't know," he said.

Gannon stared at him, his eyes more frozen than ever.

"You must be quite a guy," he said, "if somebody wants you that bad. Five hundred grand!" He turned to Butts and Joe. "Take him upstairs and tie him up tight but don't treat him rough. He's the best pal I ever had. And you, baby, you're gonna sleep in Ma's room tonight. The boys'll have to tie you up, too, but I'll tell 'em to do it respectful."

Ma said, "What are we having here, a house party?"

"The party's over," Finger Gannon whispered with definite sternness, "as far as you're concerned, Sadie. No more drinks tonight. When you've got my pal all tucked away," he said to Joe, "you go through the house and get every drop of gin there is and put it in my room. You're going to town in the morning,

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Sadie, all dressed up in your best. When you're sober they don't come any smarter than you, Sadie."

Bill stood gazing vacantly into space. For the third time death had passed him by.

CHAPTER XI

THE MISSING ELEPHANT

WHEN Sadie La Salle told Bill that she was still a good actress, she hadn't exaggerated. Sitting in Geoffrey Miles' little office next morning, she was completely unrecognizable as the woman Joe and Butts called Ma. She wore a prim black dress with a narrow lace collar. Her hair was neatly done and covered by a bonnet that dated back at least ten years. Her makeup had practically obliterated the lines of dissipation in her face and her manner was perfect. She was just a little frightened, just a little timid, just a little eager, and a little avaricious.

She had come to talk about the advertisement offering a half a million dollars reward. But she didn't like policemen, and that if there were any policemen mixed up in this she was leaving right away and wouldn't say a word. If there weren't, she would like to be put in touch with the parties who were offering the reward. She was quite sure she could help them.

Geoffrey Miles couldn't quite make out whether or not she was nothing but an old crackpot or whether she knew what she was talking about. However, it wasn't up to him. When he had been given the advertisement he had received with it very specific instructions. Carmen Gomez herself had come and had that advertisement inserted with the understanding that if there were any replies, if anyone came, they would be referred directly and immediately to her, and had exacted a promise from Miles that he wouldn't mention the matter to the police, that everything would be kept in strict confidence.

Miles had agreed. He was firmly convinced that Gannon was holding Bill Squire, if he hadn't done away with him already; and Miles' conscience was troubled about the matter. He should never had let Bill Squire persuade him to put that article in the *Chronicle*. It was nothing but an invitation to death, and now Miles was anxious to do anything he could to help.

Accordingly, he had one of the men from the plant drive the old lady out to Bellaire Heights to see Carmen Gomez. He picked up the telephone and called Carmen to tell her that she was coming.

Five minutes later Beak Toll came striding in. Captain Toll was in a bad humor, more than ordinarily truculent.

"What *is* this, what *is* this?" he demanded, brandishing the copy of the *Chronicle* that contained the advertisement. "What the devil do you think you're doing, Miles, with that paper of yours? Who put this ad in?"

"I can't tell you," Miles said. "It's confidential." Behind his thick lenses, his eyes were troubled. Geoffrey Miles was a serious, earnest man. "There isn't any doubt about it, is there?" he said, "that Bill Squire is missing?"

"Of course there isn't," Beak Toll growled. "The last that anybody heard of him was a couple of nights ago when the elevator man in his apartment house saw him go out with two men. From the description of the men it wouldn't surprise me if those two guys were a couple of torpedoes working for Finger Gannon." Beak Toll stopped talking. He punched his slouch hat more firmly down on his head and rubbed his long jaw. "This guy, Bill Squire," he declared firmly after a while, "is trying to get himself killed. He's got a two hundred thousand dollar insurance policy that he can't cash in on if he commits suicide. For some reason or other he wants that money. When Finger Gannon raided that jewelry store, Squire was there: I recognized him, even though it was dark. He ran right up to that car, smack into a bullet. And if it hadn't been for a hoodlum that works for Max Wax, he would have succeeded. There's

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a lot of talk down at the D. A.'s office. In fact they've got a warrant out for Bill Squire because the Squire boys were supposed to have embezzled some of their clients' money. I guess Bill Squire thinks that's true. He thinks it's true that his brother Arthur, committed suicide. Well, he didn't."

"How do you know?" Miles said.

"Because when we found Arthur Squire he wasn't wearing gloves."

Geoffrey Miles blinked and ran his fingers through his long hair.

"He wasn't wearing gloves?" he asked vaguely.

"That's right. If he had shot himself he would have had to be wearing gloves. There were *no* fingerprints on that gun. How are you going to shoot yourself without leaving your own fingerprints on a gun, tell me that?" Beak Toll asked as though it were all Miles' fault.

"I don't know," Miles said in a distracted way. "Who did kill him?"

"Gleason did. There isn't any doubt about it. Gleason said he was the first one in the room after the shot was fired. I made an experiment. I fired a shot in that room and told the Smathers girl and Gleason to come in the minute they heard it. The girl's room is right next to Arthur Squire's and naturally she was there first when I made that experiment. That shows you that Gleason was lying. The only reason he was there first was because he did the shooting. And another thing—Gleason volunteered information that the gun was his, claimed that Arthur must have taken it out of his desk. Why did he do that? Just in case—just in case he hadn't wiped all the fingerprints clean. He's an ex-con. We checked up on that. His name's Wilson. He was up for forgery and my bet is that if there is a shortage in the Squire account that he did the stealing. Doesn't that sound reasonable?"

SUDDENLY Geoffrey Miles grew alert. "You don't mind if I ring for a stenographer?" he said. "This is great stuff for the noon edition."

"No you don't," Beak Toll said grumpily.

"Why not?"

"All this is confidential. There's another angle to this and that's Gleason's suicide. I don't think Gleason killed himself by jumping out of the window in Max Wax's office.

"Then there's something else. There's just a chance—a chance in a thousand that Gleason didn't kill Arthur Squire. The Smathers girl can tell me that. She's sick in a sanitarium. That's why I haven't checked up on that. There might have been somebody else in Arthur's room who had done the shooting, but if there was he would have had to come out and go past the switchboard where the Smathers girl was answering a call from Bill Squire.

"I'm going out to see her in a little while, see if I can get the dope out of her. She has lucid intervals now and then, the doctor says." Beak Toll rose and glowered at Geoffrey Miles. "Now how about giving me the dope on this ad?"

Geoffrey Miles shook his head obstinately.

Beak Toll knew him too well to press the matter further. Muttering dire threats against Geoffrey Miles, none of which he meant, he strode out. He stopped at Max Wax's office.

Max Wax greeted him genially but before Captain Toll had said a half dozen words, Max Wax's expression changed. His little eyes narrowed and he picked up a pencil and began twisting it.

"I just wanted to know," Beak Toll said, "if you could tell me why this guy Gleason who jumped out of your window here should have killed Arthur Squire?"

"Gleason killed Mr. Squire? Why that's terrible, Cap'ain, that's terrible," Max Wax said, trying to think fast. "Why should you say a thing like that when everybody knows poor Mr. Squire committed suicide?"

"Everybody may know it," Beak Toll said, "but I know different. I've got to check up on just one thing more and then I'll be positive."

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The pencil snapped in Max Wax's hands. He unlocked his feet then locked them again. He wasn't afraid for himself. He was quite certain that nothing could be traced to him, but if meddling policemen could establish the fact that Arthur Squire had been murdered he, Max Wax, would have to pay two hundred thousand dollars on Arthur's insurance policy. Something had to be done to head the man off.

"You're wasting your time, Cap'ain," Max Wax said. "The Squire boys got into financial difficulties, you understand, and Arthur Squire, God rest his soul, took the only way out."

"Arthur Squire was murdered," Beak Toll maintained stoutly, "and I'm going to prove it."

Max Wax looked at him for a long time moodily, trying to make up his mind. Finally he came to a decision. He still had that suicide note so cleverly manufactured by Gil Gleason, which Bill had dropped in his office, and although it was a missive that was far from complimentary to himself, it was better to show it to the captain and convince him once and for all that he was on a false scent, than to have him establish the murder of Arthur Squire, even though Gleason was dead.

Max Wax unlocked the drawer of his desk and took out the note.

"When a man kills himself, Cap'ain, he's liable to say a lot of things that aren't so. He's excited, you understand. There's a lot of things in this letter that are nothing but lies. Everything Arthur Squire and I did was legitimate, strictly legal, you understand. Now you take a look at this and you'll see why you're wrong. You'll believe me when I say Arthur Squire did kill himself."

He handed it over.

Beak Toll read the note over twice. His disclike eyes grew flatter and flatter.

"Where'd you get this?"

"His brother, Bill Squire, brought it here, showed it to me and forgot it. It was lying right on the desk beside Arthur Squire when they found the body."

Beak Toll cupped his lantern jaw in his hand. So that was what Bill Squire had held back from him, this suicide note, and that was why he wanted that two hundred thousand dollars, to pay back the Dales, and that was why he had rushed off to see Max Wax to try and collect the insurance money. Beak Toll stuck the note in his pocket.

"What's in that letter is confidential, you understand," Max Wax said uneasily.

"Yeah," Beak Toll said. He got up, looked at Max Wax's desk, and said, "One of your bookends is gone."

Max Wax looked and sure enough one of the chrome-plated elephants was missing. Max Wax's face took on a greenish pallor. He wondered how long it had been missing. It was odd how a familiar object could disappear from one's desk without being noticed. And why was it missing? Was it the one with which he had killed Gleason? Was there some special significance to be attached to Beak Toll's remark?

"Sure," Max Wax said after a long time. "One of the bookends is missing. That's terrible."

"When did you see it last?" Beak Toll said.

He studied the other man.

Seconds went by before Max Wax answered. It might be well to say that it had been gone for days, but then he might fall into some trap that Beak Toll was laying for him. That was the trouble with a guilty conscience, you had to be so careful; on the other hand, if he said that he hadn't missed it until this very minute, that might arouse Captain Toll's suspicions, even though it was actually the truth.

"So help me, Cap'ain," Max Wax said finally, "I don't know when it disappeared. I better report it to the police, huh?" he ended, attempting a feeble joke.

"Maybe they know it already," Beak Toll said, as he walked out.

Max Wax's huge body trembled like a mountain of jelly.

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CHAPTER XII

ALIBIS OVER THE TELEPHONE

BEAK TOLL drove to the outskirts of Pearsonville to the sanitarium where Emily Smathers was being treated. The doctor in charge said:

"She's a strange case. Every now and then she has lucid intervals but most of the time she raves on and on, talks a good deal about a man named Arthur Squire. Quite often she says she'll never wear gloves again and then—"

"What's that?" Beak Toll broke in.

"She says she'll never wear gloves again. And then she talks about a woman named Gomez. That I suppose is due to the fact that she was in Miss Gomez's house when she had that breakdown, although it is my personal opinion that she must have suffered a severe shock long before that. There must have been something preying on her mind. She talks about suicide and death a lot. Just between you and me—I wouldn't mention this to her family if I were you—I don't think she'll ever recover."

"Can I see her?" Beak Toll said.

"I can't see what harm it can do," the doctor said. He took Beak Toll upstairs to a small room.

Emily Smathers lay flat on her back, looking ten times more fragile than before. Her fine skin had a bluish, transparent tinge. Her eyes, focused on the ceiling, were wide, stark and empty. Her thin fingers kept plucking at the covers.

The doctor left Beak Toll there alone. The girl seemed unconscious of his presence. Her lips were moving but she made no audible sounds. Beak Toll drew up a chair, parked his hat on the floor beside him and said:

"You're doing very nicely, Miss Smathers. The doctor says you're getting along fine."

She didn't turn her head, didn't seem to hear him.

"You'll be out of here in no time, all dressed up, looking your prettiest," Beak Toll went on, trying to make his voice soft and gentle, "in a new hat, and gloves —and gloves."

At that, Emily Smathers turned her head. Her eyes were on Beak Toll, but she looked right through him.

"I'll never wear gloves again," she said. Her thin body trembled under the covers.

"Everybody wears gloves," Beak Toll said. Far back in his head, a fantastic notion kept persisting. "There's nothing wrong in wearing gloves."

A wild light flared up in Emily Smather's eyes. She braced herself on her elbows and laboriously raised her head.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Captain Toll from the police department. You remember me, don't you? That was very sad about Mr. Squire—Mr. Arthur Squire—a nice lad. I'm just around sort of checking up on things."

The girl's head dropped back.

"Arthur," she moaned, "Arthur." There was pathos in her voice. "You can't do this to me, Arthur, you can't. I won't let you."

Despite his brusque exterior, Beak Toll was a kind man. A broad streak of decency ran through his nature. He had a feeling that there was something wrong about sitting there, listening to the girl, under the present conditions. It savored of snoopery, and yet what else was there for a detective to do but snoop? And he had his duty to perform.

"Don't you worry, Miss Smathers," he said, "Arthur Squire didn't kill himself. He was too much of a man. Somebody murdered him."

The girl, staring up at the ceiling, said:

"Yes, I know—I know. It was a horrible thing to do," she went on dreamily.

Beak Toll began to feel a little sick inside. He almost reached down, picked up his hat and fled. But no, he couldn't do that.

The girl turned her head again in a tired way. "I burned them," she said, "at least I think I burned them. I should have burned them."

"What did you burn?" Beak Toll's question was almost inaudible.

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"The gloves," she said in a funny, weak, irritable way.

BEAK TOLL reached over and stroked her hair. She seemed unaware of what he was doing, but apparently it soothed her. The little furrows disappeared from her forehead, the look in her eyes softened. Beak Toll considered. There was that question he wanted to ask her—the very question that Gil Gleason had been trying to ask her. Had she seen anyone come running out of Arthur Squire's office directly after she had heard the shot? But that wasn't necessary now; Beak Toll was quite sure it wasn't necessary.

Her eyes started to close. He thought she was going to fall asleep, but she didn't. After a time she opened them again and looked at him. He stopped stroking her hair.

"You're from the police?" she asked.

"Yes," said Beak Toll. "I just saw that note Arthur Squire left before he shot himself, telling his brother that he had killed himself."

She blinked several times as though trying hard to understand.

"A note just before he killed himself?" It struck Beak Toll that some lucidity had returned to her. "But there wasn't any note," she said in a wondering way. "No, there wasn't any note. There couldn't be any note."

"Why not?" Beak Toll asked. He held his breath.

A queer, almost sly look came into her eyes. "I was there, wasn't I? I would have seen a note."

"Of course you would," Beak Toll said soothingly. "Arthur Squire was very fond of you, wasn't he?"

"Oh, yes. Arthur Squire loves me, he loves me very much. We are going to get married. He's going to buy me a ring very soon. And I'm going to wear a veil—a very long veil. There'll be bridesmaids—I think I'll ask— He doesn't care about her at all. He's just having a good time with her. We're going to live in the country. We're going to be very happy. You know Arthur can't help being the way he is."

She was out of her mind again, under the impression now that Arthur was still alive, and her tired happiness was more touching, more heart-rending than her previous grief had been.

"I wouldn't mind," she said in a tone so low that Beak Toll had to bend down, "if I thought she really loved him, I wouldn't mind. But she doesn't. I'll kill myself first, I'll kill him before I'll let her have him."

"It's not so easy to kill people," Beak Toll said in a voice that he scarcely recognized as his own. "You get caught and into trouble." He stopped and waited, breathing hard.

A wan smile came into Emily Smathers' face. There was something else there too that strangely enough struck Beak Toll as a look of pity—a look of pity for him, of all things.

"It wouldn't be hard at all," she said. "That Gomez woman, she has so much money, she's turning Arthur's head."

She had gone off on a tangent and once more Beak Toll said:

"It's not so easy to kill people. You get caught."

She raised herself up again and looked at him. He could read in her face the desperate efforts she was making to concentrate.

"If you wear gloves," she explained with funny little eagerness, "after you wipe off the gun— If I went and put my arm around Arthur, he would snuggle up to me the way he always did without looking up and I could shoot him, oh yes, I could shoot him very easily . . ."

She dropped back onto the pillow.

Beak Toll couldn't stand any more. He picked up his hat and tiptoed out of the room. Downstairs he paused in front of the doctor's office, waging a battle with his conscience. He had the answer now—an answer he couldn't possibly have gotten, now that Gleason was dead, unless Emily Smathers had talked. Perhaps she

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would never recover, so nothing would matter. Perhaps she would. If she did . . .

THERE was no doubt about it. Emily Smathers, her mind unhinged by the fact that Arthur Squire had transferred his affections to someone else, had shot him. He, Beak Toll, had been on the wrong track right along. It was funny how that experiment he had made had done more than anything else to mislead him.

Of course Gleason had been in the room first after the shot for the simple reason that Emily Smathers had shot Arthur Squire, dropped the gun and dashed out of the room and run in again after she was sure that Gleason was inside. And with that weird cunning of the mentally deranged, she had established for herself a perfect alibi over the telephone! She had told Bill Squire that his brother was busy on another line, had gone in, shot him and then dashed out again, waited a suitable interval, and cried to Bill Squire over the phone that Arthur was dead. It was a perfect job and all over the telephone.

Beak Toll suddenly stiffened. Over the telephone! Twice over the telephone! He started off with energetic strides, then changed his mind and came back. He knocked on the doctor's door. There was something he wanted to do.

"Don't pay any attention to that girl's ravings," he said to the doctor. "What she says makes no sense at all. I'm in a position to know. She seems to think that she killed a man named Squire. Well, she didn't. A fellow named Gleason did it and I can prove it," Beak Toll lied on stoutly.

In this city of corruption and lies, that was the only corrupt and lying thing that Beak Toll had ever done.

He drove back to headquarters, a little shattered and miserable because of his interview with Emily Smathers, but he'd straighten that out. He'd be his own self again in short order. He'd take it out on Max Wax.

He summoned two of his most trusted men and with them drove to Max Wax's office. Under his arm Beak Toll had a package.

MAX WAX looked a trifle startled when he saw Beak Toll come in flanked by two uniformed officers. Beak Toll, looking more dour than ever, plunked the package he was carrying, down on Max Wax's desk.

"There's your elephant," he said. "Now let's go."

"Now let's go?" Max Wax's face took on a sickly color.

"To the police station," Beak Toll declared tersely. "I'm charging you with the murder of Gil Gleason."

Something turned over inside of Max Wax. His eyes drifted from Beak Toll to the two policemen who stood there grim, unbending.

"Wha—wha—what joke is this?" Max Wax stuttered.

"Don't start laughing," Beak Toll said sourly, "until you know what kind of a joke it is. I was here a couple of days ago, early in the morning before your office was open, and got the superintendent to let me in. I took that elephant just to get a sample of your fingerprints. That chrome-plated stuff is fine for fingerprints but these days it isn't the only kind of a thing you can get fingerprints off of. You can get them off a cloth, off of silk for instance, if you've got the right kind of equipment. Gleason wore silk socks. I sent them along with the rest of his clothes to the crime laboratory in New York. The fingerprints on Gleason's sock are the same as the ones on this elephant."

"So—so what?" Max Wax looked wildly about.

"And when we found Gleason," Beak Toll went on drearily, "in the courtyard downstairs he had a big gash on his head, but he hadn't fallen on his head. If he had, his skull would have been crushed. Somebody must have hit him first and it had to be you. Maybe you hit him with that same elephant right here. And an-

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other thing—when I was here the other morning, I looked out of the window—the window you said Gleason jumped out of and there was blood on the wall right underneath the window. The way I figure it, Gleason had something on you." Beak Toll thought he might as well get that in. In case Emily Smathers ever got well, it wouldn't hurt to blame the death of Arthur Squire on the little forger.

"Gleason killed Arthur Squire because you made him and you didn't like to have him running around with the chance that he might spill that some day, so you hit him over the head, stuck him out of the window and heaved him out by the heels." To some extent Beak Toll was guessing, but he had reconstructed the crime with remarkable fidelity.

"You're crazy, absolutely crazy," Max Wax said.

"Then how did your fingerprints get on Gleason's socks?" Beak Toll demanded.

"Listen, Cap'ain, I was telephoning the police when it happened, telling them to send a man down here to arrest Gleason. Would I do that if I was killing him?"

"Sure," Beak Toll said in a tired way. "You were making an alibi, a telephone alibi. That's a funny thing, come to think of it, twice in one case, two different people use the telephone to make an alibi—" He stopped short. He almost was on the point of betraying Emily Smathers—that poor kid, out of her mind in a hospital.

Max Wax ran a tongue across his lips.

"Listen," he declared blusteringly, "I'm going to break you for this. Nobody's going to send me to jail—not in this town. I've got influence, you understand."

Beak Toll looked thoughtful.

"Maybe they won't send you to jail," he said, "maybe they'll just hang you. Come on."

CHAPTER XIII

THE BORGIAS' WAY

CARMEN GOMEZ drove down to the block beyond Maracaibo Street where the huge plants of the Gomez Steel Mills belched forth black smoke. There was an ugly crowd at the gate because of a strike at the plant. She got out of the limousine, told the chauffeur to wait, and disdainfully walked through the mob, indifferent to their growls and mutterings. Inside the wire fence there were guards, hard, tough-looking men, guarding the plant with rifles, clubs and machine guns. The strike had been a bitter one and Carmen's father was not the sort of a man who gave in easily.

She walked along a narrow wooden walk until she came to the Executives Building, went inside, straight to her father's office.

Miguel Gomez was rather a small man, his hair was white and he was well past middle age, but the fire in his eyes was still there. His features in a small way were remarkably like Carmen's. He looked at her and frowned.

"You got my message?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And you got the money?"

He nodded, made a sidewise gesture with his head toward a suitcase that stood not far from his desk.

"It almost started a run on the bank," he said. "They had to send over to Center Plains to get that much cash. What do you think this town is? Five hundred thousand dollars in tens and twenties! No man's worth that much."

"He is to me," Carmen said easily, "that and more."

Mr. Gomez shifted irritably in his chair. He had troubles enough of his own without having to combat a headstrong daughter.

"I think you're crazy," he said. "It'll end up by your losing the money, if not worse. But there's one thing I'm going to insist on, and that is that the police follow you. I can't have you tearing off into the country looking for this—this Finger Gannon. You don't even know whether he's got this friend of yours, what's his name, Bill Squire. How do you know that this Squire man just didn't go out of town on business or something?

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You're insane about the whole business."

Carmen Gomez listened to this tirade with complete indifference.

"There will be no police," she said firmly. "I promised the woman who came to see me that there would be no police, and I'm not running any chances."

Miguel Gomez banged the top of his desk with his fist, knowing perfectly well that it was futile to argue. He started to say something violent, then was diverted momentarily by the sight of the bracelet on his daughter's wrist.

"You've lost one of the stones out of your bracelet," he said petulantly.

The bracelet on Carmen's right wrist was a barbaric sort of a thing, made of ornate gold, set with lapis lazuli stones about the size of a dime each. One of them was missing. The prongs of its setting stuck out sharply.

"You ought to get it fixed," Mr. Gomez declared, happy to find something on which there could be no argument. "You'll hurt yourself with that thing, scratch yourself, tear your clothes."

"Yes," Carmen said, "I know. I'll get it fixed."

"Now about the police," Mr. Gomez resumed austerely.

"There'll be no police," Carmen said. "What I want is about twelve of your gorillas—those kindly-looking gentlemen who are inside the fence guarding the plant, that you just imported from New York."

Mr. Gomez stared at her.

"And I want something else. I want a transport plane from New York. Get me one that's big enough to take care of them all—and their guns."

FOR a moment admiration gleamed in her father's eyes. She had his own fierce, determined temperament. This Squire was a lucky guy. What a wife she'd make! She was going to fight this out all by herself, in her own way, no matter how much it cost and no matter what risk she ran. Miguel Gomez thought of his dead wife, that meek little woman, and with a sense of personal pride he felt that Carmen was his, all his.

"And I suppose they follow you in a plane," he said with marked interest, "to see that nothing happens to you."

Carmen laughed softly.

"You're so quick, father," she declared mockingly.

"You're taking this more lightly than you ought to," he said soberly. "It won't be so easy. You're going to a place of which you have no knowledge. You'll probably be taken into a den that you know nothing about and despite all your precautions you may not come out alive once they've got the money."

"If I don't come out alive," she declared, "Gannon, if he's the man, won't come out alive either."

Mr. Gomez looked into his daughter's face and felt a little uncomfortable. There was for the moment an expression of positive evil in Carmen's unlovely face—an expression that for some inexplicable reason made Mr. Gomez say:

"Our line dates back for many centuries, back to the Borgias, in fact."

"The Borgias were Italian," Carmen said lightly, "and we're Spanish."

"The Borgias were originally Spanish. They migrated to Italy."

Carmen laughed throatily. She adjusted the bracelet on her wrist.

"Perhaps," she declared lightly, "that accounts for it."

"Accounts for what?" her father asked.

"Nothing." She looked at the jeweled wrist watch on her other arm. "It's lunchtime," she said. "The woman who came to see me is going to take me to Finger Gannon tonight. There isn't much time, father. Get busy with that telephone. Get me the plane. I want to talk to the pilot before we start."

"Supposing these—these gorillas of mine, as you call them, can't land near the place you want. What then?"

"The country's flat around here," she said. "It can't be far. They'll find a field near enough."

Further protests, further objections rose

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to Mr. Gomez's lips, but he left them unuttered. What was the use? He knew his daughter too well. She had never been in love before and now that she was, it was hopeless to try to stop her from doing anything that she wanted to. He pressed a buzzer to summon one of his secretaries to get him a plane.

Carmen kissed him lightly. "Next time you see me I'll be back—back with your future son-in-law."

Then she asked him to get a man to take the suitcase containing the five hundred thousand dollars out to the car. She was very busy, she said; she had an important errand to do. She might just as well have told him what the errand was because it didn't sound very important.

She wanted to stop at a drugstore.

AT TEN o'clock that night Carmen Gomez, alone, with the suitcase by her side, drove north on the main highway. She drove slowly, so that the plane overhead flying low, every now and then had to circle back so as not to be way ahead of her. Carmen kept watching the road, waiting for a signal. The woman who was supposed to have come direct from Finger Gannon had told her to drive slowly, to watch for her signal. She had been very canny about it, wouldn't say just where she was going to meet Carmen to direct her the rest of the way.

Finger Gannon knew what he was doing when he had entrusted that delicate mission to Sadie.

She was smart. It required only a half hour's conversation for her to feel certain that Carmen Gomez was ready to pay. There would be no tricks, nothing to fear from the police.

She had taken the bus out of town a short distance, to where Joe was waiting in the car and told him that she would bring Carmen out that night, with the money. Then she had purchased a flashlight and after spending the rest of the day in town, she was waiting in a lonely stretch of woods for Carmen's car.

It was Carmen who had suggested how she could identify the car. There was a musical horn on Carmen's roadster, and Carmen blew it at frequent intervals so that by the time she came abreast of the spot where Sadie was standing, Sadie was expecting her and waved her flashlight up and down. The roadster came to an abrupt stop. Sadie got in beside Carmen and the car swept on.

"I'm having a little trouble with my lights," Carmen said. "I hope this isn't a hard place to find."

"The lights seem all right to me," Sadie said looking ahead along the broad bright beams that lit up the highway.

"There's a short circuit," Carmen explained. "They keep going on and off." She was driving with her right hand, her left resting on the hub of the wheel where the buttons were, that controlled the lights. Just then the lights went off. "You see," she said a minute later, "they went off again."

That happened every few minutes. The pilot in the plane above could see it plainly enough. When they came to the point in the road where the lane was, where Sadie told Carmen to turn off, the lights behaved particularly badly and it was so when they turned off into the bushes to the path that led to the shack.

Sadie didn't know much about cars and saw nothing strange in that. She walked ahead of Carmen up to the shack and rapped with her knuckles on the door. Carmen was behind her carrying the bag easily, even though it was rather heavy. Joe let them in. There was a gun in his hand. He peered suspiciously out into the darkness.

"It's all right," Sadie said. "Nobody followed us; I watched."

To be sure, she had seen the plane, but it was a big plane, and planes were not an uncommon sight. They went north and south every night and it meant nothing to Sadie.

Joe shut the door and took them into the room where Finger Gannon sat. Carmen dropped the bag.

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"There it is," she said, then looked around. She saw Bill Squire, and smiled. Then she saw Gloria and the smile left her face. "Do I get both of them," she said to Gannon, "for the same price?" She had instinctively picked him out from Joe and Butts as the leader.

Gannon said nothing.

"I'm in a hurry. Do you mind counting it?"

Gannon rose. He went and opened the bag, scrutinized some of the bills, estimated the total and nodded.

"Seems to be all there," he said. Then he went back to the table and sat down. With his frozen, murky eyes he stared at Carmen.

She was rather a remarkable figure standing there so sure of herself, so perfectly contained, with her hands in the pockets of her leather jacket. There was a tremendous power about her. She somehow fascinated Finger Gannon.

"Dough must come easy to you," he whispered reflectively, "and you must want this guy bad." He turned his head slowly to look at Bill Squire, murmuring, "What's he got, anyway?"

"I made an agreement with your woman," Carmen said impatiently. "You were to get five hundred thousand dollars in small bills, unmarked, and this man was to be released. I think to begin with, he ought to be untied."

Gannon seemed to be faintly amused. That thin bluish line that was his mouth went crooked.

"All right," he said to Butts, "untie him."

Butts Crimpey cut the ropes from Bill Squire's wrists and ankles.

"There you are, lady," Finger Gannon said. "Looks to me as though your friend wasn't so glad to see you or else he's lost his tongue."

BILL said nothing. It seemed to him that he had taken an awful lot of punishment in the last few days, almost all he could stand. Carmen went over to him.

"You've done a silly thing, darling," she said in her assured way, "but it's all right. You must have guessed I'd see that nothing would happen to you."

Bill said, "No, I didn't."

He was wondering what life with a woman like this would be like. Would anything he did, would a single thought of his ever be his own?

"Let's go, darling," Carmen said. She looked at Gloria who was watching her with smoldering eyes. "You can come too, I suppose."

Gannon took it all in. He was witnessing something from a world that was foreign to his. These babies certainly were funny! They were ready to dump a carload of money into his lap—that was fine—and then they thought that all there was to it was to walk out.

Carmen turned and saw Gannon's eyes on her. He said:

"Lady, you're not going. If your old man is willing to let you have all that dough for my pal here, he's got to pay me a lot more for you—a hell of a lot more. This is the break that Gannon's been waiting for all his life. By the time I'm through, this guy Capone will look like a piker, just like a small change artist."

Carmen Gomez smiled. Gannon's eyes grew more icy, more rigid.

"I paid you," Carmen said softly, "and that's all there is to it."

For the first time some sort of an expression came into Gannon's chalk-white face, and it was anger.

"That's *not* all there's to it, lady. You're going back to your old man *after* I get what I want. If I don't get it, you're going back anyhow, only you're going back a piece at a time—first an ear, then another ear, then a hand, then another hand."

The smile on Carmen's face grew more brittle but it was still there. Unexpectedly her right hand came out of her pocket and when it did it held a small pearl-handled revolver. Carmen fired. She'd fire straight down into the floor.

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Gannon moved. He stood up, his hand on his gun, but he didn't draw it when he saw what she had done. Butts Crimpey and Joe moved. They were at Carmen's side in an instant, waiting for orders.

Bill sat tense, wondering what his chances would be if he leaped at Gannon and tried to take that gun away from him, out of its holster.

Carmen Gomez, still smiling, tossed the little revolver onto the table.

"I'm a little nervous," she said. "I better give this thing to you."

Gannon wasn't deceived.

"What's the idea?" he said, his whisper suddenly extraordinarily harsh.

Carmen's face hardened. The line of her mouth grew more contemptuous.

"People like you," she said, "are never to be trusted, are they? And the reason is that you haven't any brains. You're just animals that act by instinct. I suspected as much before I came here."

Gannon remained unmoved.

"It's a fine speech, sister," he said. "What was the idea of firing off the cap pistol?"

Carmen waited before answering. Minutes before she had been quite certain that somewhere off in the distance she'd heard the soft drone of an air propeller. She thought that she had heard the slight sound of rustling outside in the bushes. It must be her father's gorillas. It couldn't have been anything else. They ought to be in position by now.

"It meant," she said, "that by now this place is surrounded. Not one of you is coming out of here alive unless I go out first—with him." She pointed to Bill Squire.

BILL sucked in his breath. She was really magnificent. No matter how much he detested her, he had to admit that. Gloria looked from Bill Squire to Carmen, her eyes troubled.

Finger Gannon whispered, "Coppers?"

"No, not the police—much worse than the police—a lot of gorillas who work for my father; and they've got their orders. There are a dozen of them and they've got machine guns, but they're not going to kill you. If I am not out of here within five minutes they're going to start throwing gas bombs. After that, they'll take you, they'll chain you to trees and they'll *burn you!* There's only one thing that'll stop them, if they see me walking out of the front door with that man on my arm . . ."

Butts Crimpey let out an oath. Joe's teeth chattered. Gannon remained immovable, his eyes riveted on the woman. Once he ran that short finger of his across his thin mouth, then:

"So that's the way it stacks up."

"Yes," she said with sudden savagery, "that's the way it stacks up. You've got about four minutes more." She didn't even wait for him to give his consent. She walked over to Bill Squire, held out her left arm to him. "Come," she said, "we're going out. You'll have to take your chances," she said over her shoulder to Gloria. "You stay here. The men's orders are that just two of us come out."

Bill felt every muscle in his body grow taut. His tense hot eyes darkened. "I'm staying here too," he said, "with her."

"You're staying here—you won't—you won't take this chance?" Carmen Gomez looked stunned for a moment. "You mean you'd rather—you'd rather die. . . . You mean—"

Gannon had come and stood behind her. Before Bill could say anything, Gannon spoke.

"My pal is right, lady. He ain't going out with you—on your arm. Those friends of yours expect you to come out with just one man and—it's going to be me."

"Chief, you ain't gonna ditch us?" Joe screamed.

Butts Crimpey had his gun out and his teeth bared.

"We're all going out or nobody's going out," he bellowed at Gannon.

Gannon turned his head slowly and fixed them with his eyes.

"Shut up."

He turned back to Carmen, took hold

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of her arm roughly and spun her around.

"All right, sister, you're walking out of here with a man on your arm—and it's me." He turned back to Joe and Butts. "She and I are going out together and when we're out there she's going to get that bunch of gorillas and send them back where they came from. Then you boys will be in the clear."

Just then Ma appeared. It had been a long, dry day for Sadie La Salle, and now she had made up for it. She was reeling and giggling.

"There are lights outside," she said. "Lights."

Just then the beam of a strong searchlight came through the window, lighting up the room.

Carmen, still stunned, turned back and looked at Bill Squire who was standing near Gloria.

"Do you love her that much?" she asked Bill. There was a strain in her ordinarily soft voice now.

"That much," Bill Squire said.

For seconds more she stood looking at him in silence. She swayed a little. That gorgeous body of hers sagged. Then she straightened up, held her head high and proudly. She turned to Gannon. The beam of the light had shifted, disappeared.

"That was a searchlight," she said, "they're playing it on the door. Those are their orders. You've got a minute more. Are you coming?"

Gannon put on his coat, he stuck his right hand inside the lapel and it closed over the butt of his gun. He took Carmen's arm—her right arm, taking hold of her hand, interlacing his fingers with hers.

Carmen looked at him, a strange, sphinxlike smile on her lips.

Ma, still giggling, opened the door for them. Joe and Crimpey made growling, half fearful noises in their throats.

"There's nothing to it, boys," Gannon said.

IT WAS a weird scene. Bill Squire felt himself incapable of action. He and the others had crowded out into the hall. They saw Carmen and Gannon standing there at the open door bathed in the light from the searchlight. For one wild moment, Bill Squire thought of jumping either at Joe or Butts Crimpey, taking a desperate chance that he might get them both before either one of them got him, when he heard the voice of Ma directly behind him saying idiotically:

"Don't try it."

Ma was standing there with the shotgun in her hands.

Slowly Gannon and Carmen started out along the path. Gannon whispered:

"One wrong move, sister, and it's curtains for you. They may get me, but I'll get you first." Gannon's hand tightened on hers. He pressed her closer to his side to prevent her from breaking loose, then he swore. "What the hell have you got on you, a pin?" Something had pricked his wrist sharply.

"It's my bracelet," Carmen said softly. "I'm so sorry. One of the stones is gone. Here, I'll fix it."

She reached over with her other hand and turned the bracelet around. The sharp points of the open setting scraped across Finger Gannon's wrist. He said:

"You're a clumsy dame. Do you have to tear my wrist off?"

Carmen stared straight ahead and said: "I'm sorry."

Every eventuality for which she had prepared had taken place—except one. Bill Squire didn't want her. He really didn't want her. She felt suddenly terribly tired. She walked on as though in a dream. Even that one triumphant fact that she was about to destroy the man at her side, this ruthless killer, gave her no satisfaction. It would be only a matter of minutes now, just minutes. They hadn't gone more than a dozen paces when Finger Gannon began to feel extraordinarily hot inside. A certain numbness was creeping over him. There was a tingling sensation in his mouth and far down in his throat. For some reason or other each step seemed to require a greater effort.

"I—feel lousy," he muttered.

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Carmen looked at him.

The pupils in those frozen eyes of his were strangely dilated. He stumbled, held tighter to Carmen. Carmen laughed bitterly. Why was she doing this? Doing it for a man that she loved with all the passion of which she was capable, and he didn't want her. He had turned her down, preferred to stay behind for the sake of a girl who hadn't half what she had.

Gannon muttered again, more indistinctly:

"What the hell is the matter with me?" He was burning up inside but his skin felt like ice. The numbness in his limbs was increasing. He stumbled again. A short distance away he saw men, men with guns, watching, alert. Again Gannon stumbled. When he was almost abreast of the men he let out short gasps. His fingers relaxed.

Carmen stepped away from him, stood there watching while Gannon reeled crazily.

"You—you devil! You done something to me—bracelet—"

Then he went crashing to the ground.

The head guard from her father's plant said:

"I guess he's fainted, miss. I'll bring him around."

"No you won't bring him around," Carmen said in a leaden tone. "He's dead. This is Finger Gannon. The other—the other is still in there." She looked back at the cabin.

"What'll we do?" the man said.

"Get him out if you can. There's a girl in there—bring her out too, if you can."

Then in a dazed fashion Carmen walked to the right, where she remembered her car was parked. She climbed inside, started the engine, and for the last time she looked back at the shack. She took off the bracelet and flung it into the bushes. Carmen laughed, a weird, unholy sound.

"The Borgias," she said into the night. "I wonder if they knew about aconite."

INSIDE the cabin Joe said: "I hope this comes off all right." Ma stood by the window watching.

"If it don't, they're gonna burn us," Butts quavered, "machine guns, and bombs and gas, and then they're gonna lynch us." His eyes were wide and staring. He looked malevolently at Bill Squire. "If it hadn't been for you, you heel, this whole business wouldn't have happened. You had to come and stick your nose in here, you had to start this."

Ma, at the window, said:

"They're walking along just like a bride and groom going to the altar. They'd make a fine couple, that woman and Finger."

"I'd like to slit your throat," Joe said to Bill Squire, "and there's a few things I'd like to do to her." With his gun he indicated Gloria who stood close to Bill Squire.

"There are men coming out of the bushes," Ma said, "armed men. Everything looks all right."

"And suppose Finger doublecrosses us," Butts Crimpey growled, "doesn't fix it up with the men, just goes away with the dame, and those gorillas break in here and take us. You heard what she said, they're gonna burn us." His face was yellow with fear. "If they do, you'll get yours first," he snarled at Bill Squire.

Bill Squire said nothing. He moved a little nearer to the table where Gannon had sat. Carmen's little gun was there and the lamp.

Ma said, "Good heavens! Finger must be losing his nerve. He stumbled. Finger never stumbles." Then she let out a little cry. "He fell down," she said, "he fell down." She kept her eyes glued to the window pane. "He won't get up. She's walked away leaving him there. The men are walking away leaving him there." Her tone grew more frightened. "I think, I think he's dead. The men are spreading out again around the house. She's done something to him." Her voice rose to a shriek. "They're coming for us! They're coming to burn us!"

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Joe dashed to the window. What Ma had said was true. There was no mistaking the positions that the gorillas outside were taking up.

He let out a fearful oath and swung around facing Bill Squire.

A few feet away from him, Butts Crimpey, his eyes wide, savage and desperate, was raising his gun. Bill Squire didn't wait any longer. What chance there was, was now. His hand closed over Carmen's little pearl-handled revolver. At the same time he knocked the lamp to the floor, plunging the room into darkness.

He up-ended the table and crouched behind it. His left hand seized Gloria's wrist and he pulled her to the floor. Blue flames darted from Joe and Butts' guns. Bill Squire fired. He heard a curse from Joe or Butts, he didn't know which. He fired again. Something came crashing through the window with a startling effect. Neither Bill Squire, nor Joe or Butts fired for seconds, wondering what was about to happen. A queer odor began to fill the room. Again something came hurling through the window, and again. The odor grew stronger.

Bill Squire began to feel his eyes water. He was gasping for breath. As though from a great distance he could hear Joe and Butts and Ma's voices screaming as of one accord.

"Gas, gas! They're gonna get us! They're gonna burn us!"

There was a mad scrambling sound. Butts and Crimpey and Ma were trying to fight their way out to the door. Bill Squire, gasping, fighting for breath, put his arm around Gloria's shoulder and pressed her head against his body.

It seemed hours later when he came to. He was lying on the ground. Gloria was bending over him, watching him with anxious eyes. A great, burly individual was standing close by surrounded by a half dozen husky individuals.

"I hope you're the right guy," the burly individual said, "the one we came out here to rescue for Miss Gomez, because the other two are dead. Some old dame with a shotgun beat it out through the fields, but the devil with her."

He bent over Bill.

Bill Squire sat up. He blinked his eyes and he looked at Gloria.

"Am I the right guy?" he asked.

She nodded.

"You're awfully foolish," she said, "but so terribly the right guy."

THE END

Bon Voyage for Hitch-Hikers

A "STOWAWAY ring" sounds like a pretty improbable idea, but according to French Line officials such an organization exists. The French Line people have asked help from the New York police because they have been so plagued with stowaways during the last few months.

Recently the *Normandie* arrived at Havre with fourteen non-paying and uninvited guests. Shortly afterward the *Ile de France* turned up with seven. This was too much for the French Line people, and some of the police working on the problem agree that stowawaying is practically an organized business. The Spanish war seems to be the reason. It's very nearly impossible to get abroad, in the legitimate ways to join the International Brigade; and apparently a good many Americans want to go. So we have an about-face: the time-honored profession of smuggling Chinese into the United States is replaced by a thriving traffic in getting Americans out.

—*Eric Sharpe*

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Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

TWO recent altercations that have occupied space in these columns betray but one symptom that they will soon have run their course. Mellowness has set in. The tone of the newest combatants is curiously forebearing. Reason and gentleness of temper have replaced excitement.

JOHN C. STERLING

"Damyank" that I am, I found pleasure in reading the comments of P. B. Watson in the Aug. 13th number. His estimate of Lincoln seems just and is warranted by the facts of history. Had Lincoln lived, the South would have been spared the "carpetbag reconstruction". The devastated southern states needed rehabilitation only, and I believe Lincoln would have furnished material aid to this end.

This "reconstruction" was the sorriest epoch in the history of the United States, and was responsible for the greater part of the bitter feeling following the war.

The Civil War destroyed a social structure in the South which was beautiful to observe, but which was top-heavy and contained the virus of its own decay. However, it is the shame of the North that no aid was offered to replace it with something more enduring.

I am offering orchids for Mr. Watson's roses. I do not believe that any country, in any period of the world's history, has furnished finer characters than Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson and Albert Sidney Johnston, while many others were, perhaps, equally fine, if less prominent.

It is my belief that the Confederate Army was as fine a military organization as ever existed, and the North may well be thankful that it was limited as to numbers and resources.

My father was in the Federal Army through the Mississippi and Atlanta campaigns, and I had three uncles at Gettysburg. I have attended many G.A.R. reunions but never have I heard a Federal soldier speak a disparaging word of a Confederate.

I have, in the past, known some who referred to themselves as "unreconstructed secesh", but I knew them to be as good citizens and as patriotic as I, and they proved it in the Spanish-American war, and their sons proved it in the World War.

As the reunited people I think we are doing fine, and, if need comes again, the South will not be found wanting.

As to the term "traitor", I cannot apply it to any man who will put on a uniform and go out and fight for a cause he believes to be just and right. The only fault I can find with these Confederate soldiers was that they were too dam-sure they were right.

Long Beach, California

SEE what we mean? And the following exhibition of gentlemanly disagreement is if anything more so. Just a couple of scientists being politely fastidious about cosmic chaos . . .

THEO. MAHAFFEY

In the Sept. 3rd issue J. Mason gives some mild criticism to Eric North. But in doling this out, Mr. Mason makes a statement that is very contestable, i.e., "has the author never heard of Pluto, discovered in 1930 by Lowell." For a long time science "knew" that there was an unknown planet that affected Uranus to a great extent and most prominent among the men who devoted themselves to the task of locating this planet was Percival Lowell, who did the necessarily important work in his Arizona observatory. Lowell died in 1916 but his work was carried on and culminated in success in 1930. The discovery is attributed to Clyde Tombaugh but the first two letters of the name of the planet are the initials of Percival Lowell . . . Mars has two moons . . . I agree with Mason on the ability of adaption of life.

El Centro, California

We can scarcely remember those other days when this department was a kind of armed camp, with battle flaring up every time we turned our back.

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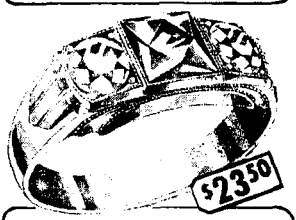

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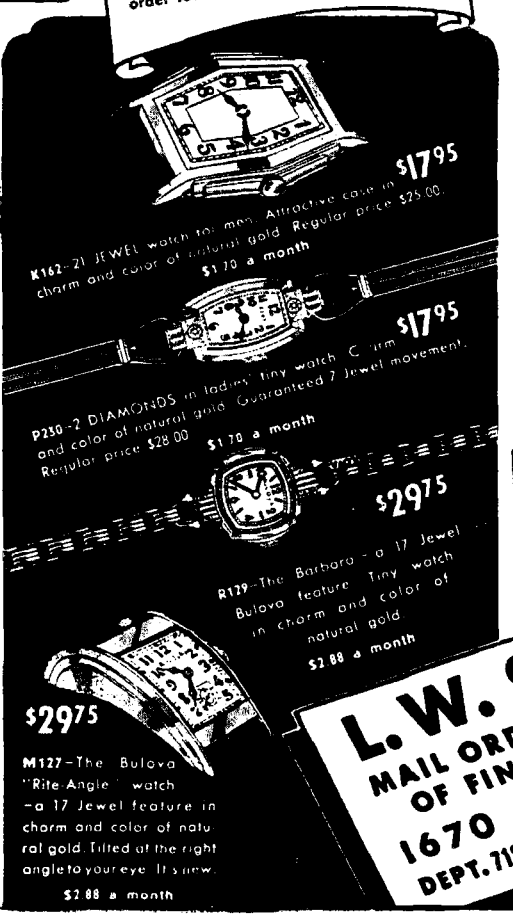
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